The Communication Culture of Flourishing Churches

By

Drake Jenkins

Presented in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy in Communication

Liberty University

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ABSTRACT

This study provides qualitative phenomenological observations that analyze and describe communication styles in ten flourishing churches. Practicing Christians contribute significantly to our society and culture. The primary goal of this study was to investigate the communication cultural themes within healthy and flourishing churches. The parameters of this study were limited to ten churches found on the *Outreach Magazine Top*-100 largest and fastest growing churches in America. Each of these churches was visited one time during a Sunday morning service. During this process, this researcher was a participant observer, examining and flourishing themes in real-time while observing the ten churches. People must attend church regularly because it could advance objective morality. This qualitative study will provide scholarly insight to future church leaders and members to help them grow in their communicative experiences with God. The issue is that religious organizations frequently struggle rather than flourish. While some churches struggle to thrive, others have learned how to use communication styles and integrated communication marketing to their advantage. Within each of these ten church cultures, several common themes emerged. Five primary communication themes were observed within these flourishing churches: inclusion, music, spiritual development, aesthetics, and benediction attention. The communication of the churches visited exemplifies each of these five categories. As a result, this study provides an in-depth ethnographic examination of the researcher's lived experiences while visiting flourishing churches to aid in the growth of God's Kingdom and the local church.

Keywords: communication culture, church, flourishing, cultural themes, spiritual health

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Dedication

First, I give glory and honor to Jehovah God for His grace and guidance in my life. This study has value because of God's mission and will set before me. God is the one who brought me to Liberty and blessed my life with instructors and mentors that have helped in my success.

Second, I want to dedicate this manuscript to my wife and our two daughters, who showed their trust and support in me in accomplishing and completing this degree. My wife is my rock and greatest support. This degree was a family effort, and each of my family deserves this dedication.

Finally, I want to dedicate this manuscript to my late pawpaw, who taught me to chase my dreams. He is a great inspiration to my life, ministry, and scholarship.

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Second, I would like to thank each committee member for walking through this journey with me and offering help.

Third, I thank Christian leaders who diligently seek to grow the Kingdom of God. This study is impossible without the insight and courage of church leaders working efficiently and expressing that work in love.

Finally, I want to thank my wife for her constant battle cry of "*one day at a time*." This statement consistently drove me to finish and complete this journey.

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Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Practicing Christians are significant to our society and culture (Koenig, 2012). Howerton (2022) explained that practicing Christians are "more than twice as likely to adopt than the general population" (n.p.). The *Washington Times* reported that people who attend religious organizations regularly improve their mental health (Richardson, 2021). Further, Richardson (2021) explained that only those who attended church regularly during the COVID-19 pandemic enhanced mental health. Salvatore and Rubin (2018) demonstrated that emerging adults are less likely to engage in criminal activity when regularly attending church. In an article from *Christianity Today,* Vanderweele and Case (2021) suggested that adolescent children regularly attending churches help to decrease depression, substance abuse, and impure sexual activity. Vanderbilt University conducted a study exploring attending church and found that attendance helps "reduce stress and enhance the longevity of life" (Bruce, 2017, n.p.).

Overview

The primary purpose of this research was to examine the communication cultural themes within healthy and flourishing churches. People need to attend church regularly because of its ability to further objective morality (Bruce, 2017; Koenig, 2012; Richardson, 2021; Vanderweele & Case, 2021). This research examined communication themes observed in flourishing church cultures by exploring different flourishing churches. This qualitative study offered scholarly insight that helps future church leaders and members grow in communicative experiences with God. Shercliff (2020) wrote, "The art of engaging the people of God in their shared narrative by creatively and hospitably inviting them into an exploration of the biblical text, by means of which, corporately and individually, they might encounter the Divine" (p. 48).

This chapter will focus on the study's background, the problem statement, the purpose statement, the ethnography qualitative design approach, and the key terms and definitions associated with exploring thriving and flourishing religious organizations. Since communication builds culture (Koenig, 2012), this study examined the words, actions, and artifacts that might contribute to a positive, inviting, healthy, thriving culture within religious organizations.

Background

This research examined the worship styles, aesthetics, supernatural spiritual elements, and strategic communication ministries used to understand better how churches are flourishing and how communication culture impacts that flourishment. This study examined a thriving and flourishing church by looking at the health of the church's communication culture and how that has impacted goodness.

Worship Communication

Johnson et al. (2010) conducted a quantitative study investigation that examined the impact of music, lights, and other worship aids and how they affected the flourishment of religious organizations. One of the study's fundamental findings is that there have been "worship wars" (Johnson et al., 2010, p. 144). Worship wars are human arguments discussing the definition of proper and orderly worship, specifically, worshiping styles (Johnson et al.). Religious organizations often struggle from within due to the vast opinions of the membership, which can lead to Christians fighting against other Christians rather than fighting against evil (Johnson et al., 2010).

The Apostle Paul wrote, "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" *(New International Version*, 1973, Ephesians 6:12*)*. Further, the

Apostle Paul explained that when one person hurts, the entire body of believers' hurts (*New International Version*, 1973, Colossians 2:27; Romans 12:15).

Worship is ambiguous and often defined only as the "Sunday morning sermon" (Canale, 2009, p. 101). However, this study explored a more holistic definition of worship, including homiletic styles, church aesthetics, membership personality, and intergenerational church factors. Johnson et al. (2010) explained that worship could help to build an inviting culture for the churched and the unchurched, specifically through music. Johnson et al. (2010) stated, "Music is at the center of the worship wars" (p. 148). Some individuals believe the congregations who communicate religious experience through loud music and light shows are doing in hopes of getting a populous to come (Johnson et al., 2010). Demmrich (2018) researched why music in the church sometimes negatively triggers people. Demmrich found that music and attention to elaborate worship often communicate a deepening and meditating experience with God. "Positive emotions strongly predict religious experience during music felt during the musical experience" (Demmrich, 2018, p. 35). Thus, music offers a positive emotion that ultimately leads to individual and church flourishment (Koenig, 2012).

Music has been in the limelight of the worship wars and how churches communicate positive entertainment value (Johnson, 2010). Matracchi and Habibabad (2022) explained that religious organizations often devalue the light and light movement's ability to play within an experience, specifically a worship service. Individuals claim that religious organizations that use lighting effects are only motivated by the entertainment value. However, light affects the religious experience as much as the entertainment value (Matrachi & Habibabad, 2022).

Light rhythm in the architecture of religious spaces plays an important role in explaining the evolution of sequence of space. Thus, it can be said that the functional role of space

sequence by light in this architecture is explained in three components: pause, movement, and emphasis. Therefore, it can be said that the sequence of space by light as a component in the field of spiritual arts has received much attention and this attention and importance shows the role of this principle in the structure of spiritual thought in art. (Matracchi & Habibabad, 2010, p. 1).

Further, Hart (2015) explained that lights do offer an entertaining aesthetic that helps to settle the minds of church members and future church members, and primarily lighting is used to communicate an experience that helps in "creating an ambiance" (p. 1), leading to spiritual engagement.

Individuals have the free will to associate with any religious organization autonomously. However, religious organizations that flourish collectively give strong attention to communicating a worship service experience (Koenig, 2012; Hart, 2015; Matrachi & Habibabad, 2022), specifically regarding the praise portion of worship with its singing and engaging lights.

Aesthetics Communication

As indicated, religious organizations that are intentional about communicating the benefits of music and lighting engagement with the worship service often flourish (Koenig, 2012; Hart, 2015; Matrachi & Habibabad, 2022), churches that are intentional about aesthetics often flourish as well (Schmidt, 1989; Snow et al., 2010).

Schmidt (1989) stated, "Clothing was one aspect of visual communication that was particularly vital in early America *church history*" (p. 38). Within worship services, individuals were taught to wear clothes that communicated cleanliness and wealth, desiring to offer their best to God (Schmidt, 1989). However, churches were more interested in communicating a more inclusive message: "Come as you are" (Sandlin, 2015, p. 1).

The New York Times released an article explaining that today's most successful and flourishing religious communicators are often dressed from head to toe in the latest designer jeans and tennis shoes to seem relevant and approachable (Bauck, 2021). Bauck wrote:

> The pastors are trying to create an environment that's inviting the people who previously wrote church off, to create a space that says: 'People are making following Jesus cool! Look at Justin Bieber and Kanye – they are professing Christians. We will dress the same way to build off this momentum.' (para. 5)

It appears then that the pastor's clothing aesthetic seemingly could offer flourishment in its ability to communicate relevance and approachableness. Also, however, building aesthetics make a difference regarding how a church flourishes.

Cantwell (1962) explained sixty years ago that the design of buildings and sanctuaries plays a crucial role in church communication. A church building and its facilities indicate the type of church presented, specifically regarding personality (Cantwell, 1962). Hutterer (2017) similarly discovered that church design and architectural aesthetics play a crucial role in church communication. Church leaders build sanctuaries with the intentionality of offering beautiful acoustical experiences and prominent gathering places to experience and engage with each other (Hutterer, 2017). Further, Hutterer explained that often churches recently chose to negate the shotgun-style auditorium for a more communal welcoming space that helps communicate relationships and community amongst the members and guests. Building a communal environment is essential to consider since often, the most flourishing churches are intentional about communicating relational community (VanderWeele, 2017).

Supernatural Elements

"When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God" (*New International Version*, 1973, I Corinthians 2:1). Krause (2007) believed that religious institutions are guided by "God-mediated control," a reference to the involvement of God's supernatural abilities (p. 520). Norskov (2018) stated, "God works through people and circumstances" (p. 9). Evans (2016) explained that the supernatural power of God, transferred explicitly from the Holy Spirit, benefits the church (p. 5).

> If my fellow Baptists will allow themselves to give the Holy Spirit more attention, more leeway in what He desires to do with them, the results will change the church as a whole and the world, as they have changed my church and my world. (Evans, 2016, p. 11).

"They are planted in the house of the LORD; they flourish in the courts of God" (*New International Version*, 1973, Psalm 92:13). Evans (2016) proclaimed that God is at work in the church's life. Further, it is unlikely that a religious institution will be able to overcome the trials of the world and build sustainable longevity without God's control (Krause, 2007). Jesus said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (*New International Version*, 1973, Matthew 19:26).

Communicating Strategic Communication in Ministry

Heide et al. (2018) stated, "Strategic communication has been defined as the study of how organizations use communication purposefully to fulfill their overall missions" (p. 452). Wiesenberg (2019) explained, "Strategic communication can be modeled in organized religion with its specific characteristics and logics" (n.p.). Flourishing religious organizations are hyper-intentional in communication and ministry (Haughton et al., 2020). Further, Haughton et al. (2020) explained that in order for churches to avoid common barriers, there is a need for

religious organizations to build communication strategies that appropriately and continuously align with the organization's mission. Lee et al. (2021) explained that historically religious organizations benefit when there are positive communication strategies throughout all church outlets that explain the mission and purpose of the organization. Boggs and Fields (2010) explained that churches that build communication strategies could grow in strength, membership growth, and in "higher measures of church performance" (p. 305).

Fishers or Fishers of Men

"And he said to them, 'Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.'" (*English Standard Version*, 2001, Matthew 4:19). Jesus made it clear that Christians are to become great fishers of people. This is a call to communicate the blessings of being connected to Jesus in a beautiful community. The Bible calls this community *Koinonia.* Koinonia is a Greek term that refers to the concept of community and fellowship (*English Standard Version*, 2001, Philippians 2:1-2, Acts 2:42, I John 1:6-7). It is associated with Christian communities prioritizing sharing, mutual support, and spiritual growth in many contexts. The benefits of Koinonia are numerous and can significantly impact individuals and communities. Koinonia provides a sense of belonging and support. Participating in a community that shares common values and goals can make individuals feel connected to something larger than themselves. This can reduce isolation and promote a sense of purpose and identity. The more you fellowship with a Koinonia mindset, the more fish are caught as Jesus discussed in Matthew 4:19.

Interesting to note about fish, Mánek (1957) explained that though many of the disciples being called in the synoptic Gospel accounts were fishermen, Jesus' hyperbole and somewhat allegoric expression further explored the "cosmological myths in which the water is seen as the enemy of God" (p. 138). Fishing was known and famous in the biblical world and the ancient

near east, and this was true because of its economic, social, and sustainable advantaged outcomes (Mánek, p. 138). Daw et al. (2012) wrote, "Globally, fisheries are challenged by the combined impacts of overfishing, degradation of ecosystems and impacts of climate change, while fisheries livelihoods are further pressured by conservation policy imperatives" (p. 1). Stevenson et al. (2011) examined the misunderstandings of fishery behaviors and discovered that different fish prefer different ecosystems, leading to intentional selectivity within aquatic living (p. 813). Becoming fishers of men, similarly, moves an individual to be intentional about the behaviors and attitudes of different people if the person is persuaded to change (Lancaster, 2003).

Further, it becomes increasingly important to the fisherman to realize the selectivity and intentionality of a fish's desired ecosystem, especially if a fisher wants to catch the fish (Daw et al., p. 3). Meka (2004) conducted research exploring what influences a fish to come near a fisherman's bait and concluded that to catch a fish, you must be equally equipped in the knowledge of fishery ecosystems and know the fish's desired food choice (p. 1311). There are many different types of fish, and if a fisherman is going to be successful in catching the fish, the fisherman must educate and adapt to the selectivity of fish.

Further, fishers were extremely intentional regarding where nets were cast, how nets were cast, what time to fish, and what bait to catch the fish (Smith, 1959, p. 194). Egyptian pantheon mythology narratives concluded that danger, deception, and evil spirits ruled the waters of the Ancient Near East (Grenfell, 1906, p. 184). However, in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus calls the fisherman to negate the fear of the unknown and work intentionally to become "fishers of men" (*English Standard Version*, 2001, Matthew 4:19b). Fear is negated, and evangelism is accomplished when individuals become more concerned with the fish and less concerned with selfish ambition.

Introduction to the Problem

The problem is that religious organizations are often struggling rather than flourishing. *Gallup* conducted a case study that explored the most effective ways to grow a church plant and discovered that from 1998 to 2000, nearly 70% of U.S. adults were connected to a religious organization (Jones, 2021). However, from 2016-to 2018, only about 50% of U.S. adults attended a church (Jones, 2019). Proper communication is one of the critical components of success (Jones, 2019, p. 43). Pillay (2020) explained that the global pandemic of COVID-19 has caused a great disturbance in the world and stated, "Churches and religious communities have not been spared; they have been severally affected and, in all likelihood, permanently transformed by the pandemic" (p. 266). Churches are struggling to flourish, but some congregations have learned how to use communication styles and integrated communication marketing to win in the struggle.

McGowan (2018) explored the realities that some churches in America are struggling, but others are actively flourishing:

> So there are two stories here, two narratives, two realities. Two mistakes in their interpretation, however, seem to be calming. One is to make what can only be called serious theological claims about either the decline, with a real or supposed signs of hope, particularly to invoke the hand of God or the presence of the Spirit as though they were readily discernible (and apparently aligned with one's own institutional commitments and interests) the other is to harmonize these two narratives by compromise or averaging; to decide things are not so bad, most obviously, because clearly not everything is bad. Yet denial is not a very useful planning tool. In fact, things really are that bad; but that is not the only story. The church is failing and flourishing at the same time. (p. 78)

VanderWeele (2017) explained that religious organizations could flourish in the 21st-century with proper social and health communication from the organization. People today often attend churches that offer optimistic communication that explores how to build spiritual, social, and mindful health that can become part of an individual's daily life (VanderWeele, 2017). Dunaetz (2020) suggested that churches are great opportunities to experience God when the communication is relational and practical. Dunaetz (2021) explained that churches interested in flourishing and building goals and objectives around that interest often thrive in America. Further, Dunaetz explained that flourishing churches seem to find the ability to limit negative communication within their culture. "The cultural context is far more than technology; it includes all the beliefs and values generally held by a group of people" (Dunaetz, 2021, p. 11).

Fish are elusive aquatic vertebrates (Daw et al., p. 3), and perhaps this is why there are seven different types of lures (e.g., plugs, jigs, spinners, spoons, soft plastics, flies, poppers) (Daw et al., p. 4). Coincidentally, people are equally elusive. If religious organizations are going to catch fish, these organizations must evaluate and possibly evolve the metaphoric lures so that people can be caught. This study examined how each church's lure can be used to gain religious flourishment vitally needed in our world (Vogt, 2014; Koenig, 2012).

Research Questions

The following questions guide this study:

RQ 1 – What communication themes are observed in flourishing church cultures?

RQ 2 – How is a church's culture communicated?

RQ 3 – How does an outsider receive the culture communicated by a flourishing church?

Theoretical Considerations

The elaboration likelihood model theory credited to Richard E. Petty and John T. Cacioppo (Bhattacherjee & Sanford, 2006) is the primary theory informing this study.

Elaboration Likelihood Model Theory

The theoretical framework centered around the elaboration likelihood model theory (ELM) credited to Richard E. Petty and John T. Cacioppo (Bhattacherjee & Sanford, 2006) used as a platform for observing communication persuasion and communication experience lead to results. Using the ELM theories offered a specific framework that explores the foundation that has led to a greater understanding of church flourishment.

Liking Principle

In addition to ELM, the liking principle helped to provide an additional theoretical perspective to this study. Cialdini and Goldstein (2002) described the liking principle as an effective persuasive tactic to "govern how one person might influence another" (p. 40). People are genuinely more likely to come in proximity with those they like (Cialdini & Goldstein, p. 40). Likability is incredibly genuine regarding religious worship (Cromartie, 2021). Cromartie (2021) explained that people are looking for a place of community within a religious organization that offers goodness and friendship. Cialdini and Goldstein (2002) suggested that liking an individual was "twice as important as was their opinion of products" (p. 40). "Researchers have identified four primary determinants of our fondness for another person: physical attractiveness, similarity, cooperation, and the extent to which we feel the person likes us" (Cialdini & Goldstein, p. 41).

Cialdini (2015) explained that people would associate with others and seemingly come to like others respectfully within the parameters of three primary factors:

- We like people who like us and tell us,

- We like people who are similar to us,

- We like people who cooperate with us toward mutual goals. (p. 5)

The most cited threat to a church's healthy flourishment concerns the imbalance of intergenerational ideologies aligned with the struggle of humanism and cognitive dissonance (Lawler et al., 2018, para. 2). Thus, there is an inevitable problem when multi-generational groups are unwilling to concede known orthodoxy.

Purpose Statement

This study examined what communication themes were observed in flourishing church cultures. While religious organizations vary depending on specific practices and people leading them, central leanings can provide important information regarding successful practices. This is magnified when considering religious communication due to its ability to communicatively transform the general populous (Tukey, 1990, p. 67). This research explored the communication phenomenon using a qualitative approach. Aspers and Corte (2019) stated, "We define qualitative research as an iterative process in which improved understanding to the scientific community is achieved by making new significant distinctions resulting from getting closer to the phenomenon studied" (p. 139). Within this qualitative study, a central focus on the phenomenological tradition offered by Craig (1999) will help interpret that there is no way to explain why churches flourish fully, but through this research, we may be able to gain valuable insights related to the communication strategies used in flourishing churches.

Significance of Study

This study is significant because it explored the fundamental communication strategies that flourishing churches have used to build thriving congregations. Brenner (2016) stated, "The

nature of religious change and the future of religion have been central questions of social science since its inception" (p. 563). Further, Brenner explained that numerical growth is not the only indicator of a flourishing church, though it is a good "measurement and has potential for offering validation" (p. 581). Since membership numbers offer some insights into whether a church is flourishing (Brenner, 2016), it is crucial to examine the numbers of churchgoers, specifically for this study, church members in the United States. Smith (2021) explained that nearly 33% of Americans never attend church or synagogue, compared to 22% of Americans who attend every week.

Pew Research Center explained, "In recent years, the percentage of U.S. adults who say they regularly attend religious services has been declining, while the share of Americans who attend only a few times a year, seldom or never has been growing" (n.p). Lifeway Research reported in October of 2021, "The average U.S. congregation gathers in a building that seats around 200, however, only 65 attend the median church each week" (Earls, 2021, n.p.).

Based on the Statista, Pew Research, and Barna findings, it appears that the U.S. American churches today are struggling with the decline (Earls, 2021). Further, Barna explained that churches in America are declining more regularly than flourishing (Preez, 2021). However, there are several flourishing churches, which is the significance and rationale of the study. *Outreach Magazine* released the Top-100 list for churches with the highest attendance, which helps examine church flourishment. Flourishing churches are not limited to the *Outreach Magazine* Top-100 list, but this study with use the *Outreach Magazine* for this research. The study hopes to examine what flourishing churches communication is doing to build a healthy culture. The rationale or reason for undertaking this given study is to be able, through a qualitative ethnographic design, to discover what it takes to make a flourishing church with a

culture of spiritual decline (Wilcox et al., 2015). This study is significance as it explains why churches are seemingly flourishing in this culture. Regarding religious organizations that are struggling, it appears that church memberships are struggling to maintain and expand their membership sizes because of an inevitable gap within the generational pool of the populous.

Intergenerational Struggles

Jolliffe and Foster (2021) explained that religious organizations across all religious institutions struggle with the difficult challenge of intergenerational audiences (n.p.). Research suggests struggles within intergenerational habitats primarily because of "attitude or differences between generations" (Jolliffe & Foster, n.p.). Regarding faith and religiosity, traditionalists within the silent generation and baby boomers tend to be more competitive. That competitive nature pours into the nostalgia of individual core belief systems (Jolliffe & Foster, n.p.). Lancaster (2003) explained that traditionalists tend to follow nostalgic ideologies passed down from persuasive influence, incredibly persuasive influences from an idolized family member or a role model (p. 37). Further, Lancaster noted that traditionalists tend to believe that millennials are more interested in self than other generations and that self-interest has led to an inappropriate need to create new norms without logical reasoning for the new norms (p. 37).

Theological Struggles Amongst Generations

Since this study sought to expound upon the communication themes observed within flourishing church culture, it is important to expand upon the communication styles offered with theology amongst generational groups. Eisner (2005) further explained that one of the primary reasons for the disconnect between the traditionalist generation and the millennial generation is that the silent generation believes that if a system is in place, it ought not to be disturbed (p. 6). This is a direct contrast with the ideology of the millennial generation, in specific, regarding faith

(Jolliffe & Foster, 2021, n.p.). "Millennials are less religious than other generations and have a lower propensity to identify with specific religious groups, though they are increasingly interested in spirituality, along with the desire to experience meaningfulness" (Jolliffe & Foster, n.p.). Millennials are not anti-religious but differ with religious institutionalism, which directly conflicts with the traditionalist era mindset (Eisner, p. 9). The conflict becomes increasingly divisive and intensified when the traditionalist and baby boomers describe the millennials as "being lazy, over-confident, unprofessional and unethical" (Kumar, 2014, p. 107). Coincidentally, millennials describe the traditionalist era as dogmatic and authoritarian and unwelcoming to youthfulness (Kumar, p. 108). The research explained that "each generation has wanted to grow in their faith collectively even if it means in diverse ways" (Ellor & McFadden, 2011, p. 50). Nevertheless, generations will have to find ways of building unity and agreement if the church can continually affect positive change. However, it is essential to examine whether this is possible.

Historical Struggles

Edmunds (2005) conducted research exploring the systemic processes of different generational groups. He found that people are often unwilling to submit to generational customs if the individual is detached from that generational group (Edmunds, 2005). Manneheim (1936) suggested that this occurs primarily because "members of a generation are held together by the experience of historical events from the same or similar vantage point" (p. 276). Manneheim was an esteemed sociologist who researched the gap between generations and generational thought (Edmunds, p. 561). Pilcher (1994) described Manneheim's (1963) essay entitled *The Problems of Generations* as being "the most systematic and fully developed treatment of generation from a sociological perspective because it firmly locates generation within socio-historical contexts and

is part of a wider sociological theory of knowledge" (p. 482). Pilcher quotes this excerpt from

Mannerheim's work to help better explain why generations often differentiate from each other:

> "Manneheim identifies generational location as a key aspect of the existential
>
> determination of knowledge. Generational location points to certain definite modes of
>
> behavior, feeling, and thought, and the formative experiences during the time of youth are
>
> highlighted as the key. In which social generations are formed" (p. 483).

The point being made by Manneheim is that there is an evident gap within generational groups

primarily because there is an inevitable chasm between individual lived experiences (Pilcher, p.

483). Costanza et al. (2012) concurred with the previous research conducted by Manneheim but

suggested that generations are too different and too stubborn to get along during daily

interactions (p. 378). However, Rudolph et al. (2020) conducted research attacking the claimed

doctrine centered around generational divisiveness and discovered that it is possible to bridge the

gap of intergenerationalism with common courtesy and patience (p. 17).

The GAP Struggle

Rudolph et al. (2020) stated, "Recognizing and exploring the ubiquity of generations is

important, especially because the evidence for their existence is, at best, scant" (p. 1). Rudolph et

al. conducted research exploring whether there was ubiquity (e.g., a common occurrence) of

generational ideological separateness (p. 2). "People commonly talk about generations and like

to make distinctions between them despite their ubiquity, and a consensus is coalescing across

multiple works of literature that suggests that all the attention garnered by generations and

generational differences has been much 'ado about nothing'" (Rudolph et al., p. 3; Twenge,

2010, p. 202). Individuals often hear messaging and enhance that messaging without intellectual

knowledge surrounding the issue to gain attention amongst the populous, which leads to false

information being absorbed and spread through persuasive manipulation (Rudolph et al., p. 4).

Further, Rudolph et al. explained that if individuals would ignore falsified rhetoric

communication regarding the apparent differentiation about generational normalcies,

generational differences would likely immediately disband (p. 4).

Regardless of the inception of the intergenerational struggles, whether from the noted

evidence of cognitive differences (Costanza et al., 2012; Edmunds, 2005; Pilcher, 1994;

Manneheim, 1936), the theological communication differences (Eisner, 2005; Jolliffe & Foster,

2021), the real problem of historical communication presented within generations (Edmunds,

2005; Manneheim, 1936; Pilcher, 1994) or a gap produced and formed from falsified uneducated

talking points (Rudolph et al., p. 3; Twenge, 2010, p. 202), there is a problematic gap that is

causing the U.S. American church struggles and declines at rapid speeds (Earls, 2021). Thus, the

significance and rationale of this study are imperative because it explored the fundamental

communication strategies that flourishing churches have used to build thriving congregations to

avoid falling into the gaps.

Flourishing Religious Organizations

As indicated, this research examined what communication themes were observed within

flourishing church cultures. Thus, it is essential first to define and explain what it means to be

healthy and flourishing within the parameters of this research. Wilt et al. (2018) described

struggling as existence with the negated purpose of fulfillment. "Struggle with ultimate meaning

reflects concerns about whether one's life has a deeper meaning or purpose" (Wilt et al., 2018, p.

240). *Harvard Business Review* explained that any organization that has lost its ability to lead or

change individuals is likely in a season of struggle (Carucci, 2016). Nicolosi (2012) suggested

that churches often struggle because of a lack of communicative vision, in specific, regarding cultural and theological relevance.

Religious organizations achieve flourishment through religious practice (Schoenber, 2017, p. 530). Jesus said, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. Furthermore, surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (*New International Version*, 1973, Matthew 28:19-20). Guder (1994) explained that successful churches are churches that give purposeful interest to evangelism (p. 145). Further, Guder explained that churches would struggle with the ability to build sustainable flourishment without a populous to contribute to the program (p. 151). Meintel (2020) stated that biblical correctness gives intentionality to correctness and authenticity (p. 8). Preaching the Bible has become increasingly relevant and vital in recent years because baby boomers and millennials claim that an essential feature when searching for a church home is a church filled with authentic people and authentic doctrine (Evans, para. 5; Meintel, p. 11). Further, Chidester (2003) explained that fake religion would destroy a church, but authenticity will grow it (p. 74). Keister (2008) explained that churches that build numerically based on authenticity also grow financially sustainable wealth and sustainable flourishment.

Also, religious organizational success is achieved through church health (Schoenber, 2017, p. 530). Mills (2016) explained that religious organizations often lack fundamental church success because of an "atmosphere of ill health" (p. 68). "For lasting change to occur, church leaders and members must sense the urgency of the situation and determine that doing nothing is worse than the anticipated pain of changing long-standing practices or traditions" (Mills, p. 68). Healthy churches are intentional about self-examination (Mills, p. 68). Further, Powell et al.

(2021) explained that churches that hold fast to doctrinal precision (e.g., healthy) and offer that precision in a palatable way are likely religious organizations that are growing doctrinally, numerically, and finically (p. 239).

Parameters of the Study

This research was limited to the worship service experience alone but recognizes that church culture is complex and multifaceted. Thus, the church experience was designed within the parameters of an in-person, Sunday morning worship service experience.

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Summary

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Religious organizations struggle to understand what fundamental communication strategies best bring about flourishing churches. Further, most churches within the United States are struggling with good health and flourishment (Brenner, 2016). Thus, this research examined communicatively what flourishing churches are doing to build strong and healthy church cultures.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Religious organizations are trying to maintain good health and flourishment amongst religious people. As suggested in the introductory chapter of this research, this study focused on how churches are flourishing. Through an ethnographical qualitative research design, the researcher visited and observed churches and reported all findings related to the phenomenon of church flourishment. This research is essential due to the evident problematic challenge amongst the flourishment of religious organizations. The primary goal of this chapter is to provide a clear and comprehensive informative narrative reviewing the previous works that offer helpful insights that might lead to the negating of the problem described in chapter one. By visiting these churches, this researcher made notes in real-time and offer what flourishing church culture is being communicated for the church to thrive. Specifically, this literature review previewed the research regarding persuasive humanism and marketing cognition relating to religious communication among generations.

Communication Identity

If religious organizations are going to flourish, researchers (Munodawafa, 2008; Shannon, 1948; van Ruler, 2018) explained that these organizations must consider the sender and receiving processes of human communication, especially regarding the differing responses from the silent generation to the Millennials' generational inhabitants. For clarity, the silent era, also called the Traditionalist (Galowich, 2018), was a group of post-war Americans who struggled with verbal communication after World War II had ended and the troops were sent home (Ng et al., 2010).

The most startling fact about the younger generation is its silence. With some rare

exceptions, youth is nowhere near the rostrum. By comparison with the Flaming Youth of

their fathers & mothers, today's younger generation is a still, small flame. It does not

issue manifestoes, makes speeches, or carry posters. It has been called the 'Silent

Generation. (Ng et al., 2010, p. 284)

Van Ruler (2018) examined many components of strategic communication and its

potential depth and noticed that communication is an "ongoing process of meaning construction"

(p. 367). Levinson and Holler (2014) further explained that communication is a constant

negotiable shifting throughout external and internal interactions. The Russian linguist, Mikhail

Bakhtin, proposed that strategic communication is predicated on a concept known as *already*

spoken that inevitably is formed through verbal and non-verbal communication (Brandist et al.,

2016). Communication is a challenging systemic process with many moving parts, and

successful engagement is more probable when individuals or organizations consider both the

external and the internal (van Ruler, 2018). However, before communication processes can be

understood, first, communication must be defined to explore what communication is and then

explore its generational influences, which inevitably leads to a great understanding of religious

orality.

Communication Defined

Munodawafa (2008) wrote, "Communication involves the transmission of verbal and

non-verbal messages consisting of a sender, receiver and channel" (p. 369). Koessler et al.

(2021) explained that communication is one of the critical fundamental benefits for sorting

through societal engagement, however, also stated that its definition is increasingly challenging

to complete (p. 683). Communication is increasingly elusive and still offers insights and benefits

to social engagement cooperation group identity and gives power to collaborative core belief

systems (Koessler et al., p. 686). Finne and Grönroos (2017) noted that communication is the art

of connecting points from a sender to a receiver in hopes of efficiency (p. 446). Undoubtedly,

communication is an avenue for transferring information (Finne & Grönroos, p. 446). Still, also

it is a platform for integration and interpretation of human systems working together to achieve

value (Koessler et al., p. 701). Inevitably, communication is a systemic process of multiple

personalities trying to link together, increasing individual ambiguity. Therefore, defining

communication is not so easily accomplished and usually "requires a full understanding of

behaviors associated with the sender and receiver and the possible barriers that are likely to

exist" (Munodawafa, 2008, p. 369).

Nevertheless, regardless of the truism of the multi-disciplinaries of communication

studies definitions and its elusiveness, communication is best defined as the systemic process of

collaborative integration and interpretation.

Communication Models – Transmission Model

Communication is a system working together for a common goal of understanding

(Munodawafa, 2008). Shannon (1948) mathematically explained this communicative process as

a systemic building process that constantly moves forward and backward. The communication

sender offers a message to a receiver, though through the transmission process, there is the need

for cognitive encoding and decoding of the original sender messaging (Shannon, 1948). Further,

within the communication process of sending, encoding, decoding, and receiving, the

inescapable factor of noise can shift the sender's original meaning or primary purpose of the

message being sent (Shannon). Communication between sender and receiver is not so easily

accomplished due to the reality of working within the encoding and decoding processes and the inevitable noise that often distorts the messaging for the receiver (Sponaugle, 2019).

Sponaugle (2019) explained that senders and receivers have little control over how messages are encoded and decoded. Further, Sponaugle concluded that senders and receivers have no control over the noise, leading to distorted feedback and that it is difficult for senders and receivers to gain and glean insights appropriately, even amongst the encoding, decoding, and inevitable noise.

Communication Models – Ritual Model

Communication is accomplished through senders and receivers, especially ethnocentrism and intergenerational transmission (Sponaugle, 2019). Sponaugle wrote, "We hear all the time that it's important to know your target audience, but why is it so important if you can't communicate with everyone all the time, and when you try to communicate, you often fall flat" (Sponaugle, 2019, p. 16). Anderson (2011) explained that organizations could achieve flourishment within communication by building a collaborative culture of commonality. This concept of building cultural and communicative collaboration is known as the ritual model (Anderson, 2011). Carey (1989) stated, "A ritual view of communication is directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs" (p. 18). Carey's research was purposed to expand upon the ritual model and how it allows for building culture and shared meaning (Anderson, 2011). "Communication is linked to terms such as 'sharing,' 'participating,' 'association,' 'fellowship,' and 'the possession of a common faith'" (Carey, 1989, p. 18). While communication is elusive and received differently from one generation to the next, unity can be obtained through suitable communication presentations.

Intergenerational Communication

Cultures need to build shared communication (Anderson, 2011), but that can be difficult regarding generational groups. Specifically, each generation has created its own culture of communication (Downs, 2019; Myers, 2010; Venter, 2017), which has inevitably led to a multi-functioning church communication organism that seeks collaboration for flourishment (Venter, 2017). The University of Colorado Boulder researched the most effective ways to communicate to the silent generation, the baby boomer generation, generation X, millennials, and Gen Z. Each generation received messaging differently (Ogata, 2008).

The Silent Generation

Research noticed that the silent era is much more reserved and traditional in its ideology. When communicating with this group of individuals, the messenger ought to intentionally offer orality marinated in truism, avoiding theatrics altogether (Enam & Konduri, 2018). Enam and Konduri further noted that the silent generation seeks common orality that is traditional and succinct, getting quickly to the point of the matter, especially regarding faith communication. During the world wars, religious communicators were heavily invested in proclaiming the simplicities of intrinsic values giving little attention to illustrative narratives and application but instead comprehensively concentrated on absolute black-and-white truth about objective morality (Fairclough, 1986). Pollard (1920) explained the challenges of secular societal living from the vantage point of pastoral communicators by exploring how complex the intricacy of societal living might become. Biblical precision must always be proclaimed with empathetic yet aggressive absolute dogmatism. Pollard continued to note that "a preacher must know his time" (p. 302), but the essential message and delivery of the letter should remain unchanged.

In the 1990 literary work entitled, *The Evolution of Human Communication: From Theory to Practice*, Corey (1990) wrote, "Communication is the process of creating, interpreting, and negotiating meaning" (p. 5). Corey explained that communication transactions would shift due to ambiguous and negotiated ideologies regarding the messenger and the receiver. In communication, both the sender and the receiver are entangled within an interactive systemic process of interpretation and integration (Corey, 1990). However, if an individual is unwilling to see another's point of view from a differing vantage point, the feedback becomes increasingly apathetic and pointless (Corey, 1990). Nevertheless, the silent generation left very little room for inevitable integrated ambiguity regarding communication, specifically religious orality (Pollard, 1920). However, there must be a reason that the silent generation sends and receives messages in this way. *Forbes* conducted a research survey that examined how communication was most successfully received across generational platforms and determined that the silent generation, also referred to as the traditionalist, was living during a time of political and economic uncertainty, which generally led to permanence thinking across all areas of thought (Galowich, 2018). Thus, ideologies were formed logically and considered authoritative, which excluded innovative and integrated intellectual ambiguity (Galowich). "Respect is critical in several aspects, including respect for their age and experience, respect for the chain of command, and respect for the organization's history and legacy" (Galowich, para. 4).

Further, Galowich explained that it was seemingly improbable to change the lasting ideas of an individual that grew up during the traditionalist age (para. 5). Changing the opinions of others becomes increasingly important to recognize within the life of religious organizations in the 21st-century, especially those religious organizational communities filled with intergenerational audiences. Venter (2017) conducted research that helped in the exploration of

the communication gap from one generation to the next. Among intergenerational people, Venter

noticed that one of the primary communication differences from one generation to the next is

verbal expressions (Venter, 2017). However, because of an abundance of technological

innovation, the gap has between generational communication continues to widen (Venter, 2017).

Communication and Technology

The technological communication shift and the expressive communication shift have

inevitably affected religion. McMurray and Simmers (2019) conducted research that examined

the phenomenological impact that generational diversity has had on spirituality, in specific,

within religious organizations. "Religion is generally characterized as an outward, formal set of

standardized practices and beliefs" (McMurray & Simmers, p. 70). Traditionalists, however, tend

to hold to traditional nostalgia, especially regarding belief systems, which causes tension

amongst other generational groups (i.e., Millennials) who statistically tend to be more open to

change and interpretive ambiguity (McMurray & Simmers, 2019). Further, McMurray and

Simmers determined that the presence of various communication styles is one of the most

significant challenges within religious organizations. The silent generation, which has been

embedded in the age of traditionalism, believes collectively in generational correctness,

specifically regarding biblical precision but is also unwilling even to consider changing what

seems to be logically appropriate, which often leads to organizational failure (McMurray &

Simmers, 2019).

The Apostle Paul wrote, "I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ

that all of you agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same

mind and the same judgment" (*English Standard Version*, 2001, I Corinthians 1:10). For the sake

of relevance, notice the phrase "one mind." In Greek, this is translated from the transliterated

word νοῦς, meaning "the faculties of perceiving and understanding and those of feeling, judging, and determining" (Ellis, 2000). Further, Ellis explained that when an individual communicates a religious message, people need to understand that bringing that message with a non-traditional style does not mean the statement is false doctrine. Mataic and Finke (2018) exposed how different generations of religious people tend to like other types of preaching. Still, differing styles often lead to spiritual pressure, and "these pressures are felt most acutely by the non-traditional religions" (p. 127). Willard and Norenzayan (2017) explained that the primary religious struggle amongst generations today differentiates religiosity from spirituality. Millennials lean more toward new-aged spirituality, which is "predicted by such things as openness to experience, absorption, fantasy-proneness" (p. 139), and those associated with the traditionalist era tend to seed a "religious belief predicted by authoritarianism and traditionalism" (Willard & Norenzayan, 2017, p. 139).

Furthermore, growing up in the traditionalist era, the traditional silent generation has inevitably forced ethnocentrism that often negates opportunities for shifted thinking (Sponaugle, 2019, p. 16). Myers and Sadaghiani (2010) similarly researched the communication gap within generations. They found that traditionalist often struggles with communicating with millennials primarily because "millennials have distinctive characteristics that may make interacting with them more difficult than with previous groups" (p. 231). Myers and Sadaghiani found that "millennials are less responsible and untrustworthy" (p. 232). Religious organizations ought to consider closely the reality that millennials seem devious (Meyers & Sadaghiani, 2010), especially since religious people are more likely to attend a church community composed of a membership that is trustworthy and forthright (Moon et al., 2018, p. 947).

Communicating with Baby Boomers

After the silent generation came the baby boomers, which are a generation of people born between 1946 to 1964 (Venter, 2016). Similar to the traditionalist of the silent era, baby boomers have appreciated the nostalgia of loyalty, trust, and traditionalism (Venter, 2016). However, Venter also concluded that baby boomers experienced a technological advancement within the communication spectrum that their predecessors avoided, specifically Internet technologies and capabilities, though even the baby boomer was not entirely convinced that the computer would be the computational anthropomorphic Savior. Further, Venter explained that baby boomers fundamentally distaste Millennials due to their definition of interpersonal communication and the overuse of societal, technological advancement (p. 501).

Baby boomers were increasingly innovative regarding religiosity and spiritual communication and intentionally held to "adopted belief systems within a marketplace of ideologies and spiritual communities" (Silverstein & Bengtson, 2018, p. 9). Baby boomers believed in listening to the communication from the spiritual leader (Silverstein & Bengtson). Further, Silverstein and Bengtson (2018) discovered when researching how baby boomers responded to contact from the secular and spiritual world that the baby boomer generation mainly wanted biblical orality to be presented with the traditional exacting and structure of the generation that preceded them.

As a result, the challenge regarding the millennial generation and generation Z is the clear differentiation regarding how communication is sent and received since the millennial generation sought to avoid traditionalism and passed down inflexible structural core belief systems (Silverstein & Bengtson, 2018). Long (2016) examined if baby boomers and the millennial generation could come together in the same religious organizations and nonprofit

organizations. The study results help explain why intergenerational religious organizations often struggle to move forward in numerical growth, financial solvency, and programming efficiency. However, primarily, the research demonstrated that the lack of success is contingent on differing communication styles (Long, 2016). Long discovered a genuine struggle in bridging intergenerational groups and religious organizations should be prepared for the challenge.

Millennials

From the late 1970s to the mid-90s came a group of individuals known as the millennial generation (Venter, 2016, p. 499). Millennials value motivated innovations rather than tradition (Milkman, 2017; Pyöriä et al., 2017; Waters & Bortree, 2012). Further, Waters and Bortree explained that millennials crave innovation, which often negates traditionalism and adds ideological dogmatism, especially in religious organizations. "Research continues to document a decline in the number of young adults affiliated to a religious institution" (Waters & Bortree, p. 200). Waters and Bortree also stated that if churches want to see successful numeric growth and financial stability, specifically millennials, spiritual leaders and pastors should consider offering spiritual communication founded upon motivation as an illustration. Jenkin and Martin (2014) explained that millennials were drawn toward a religious organization that would offer a relational community through compassionate communication.

Coincidentally, Boehme (2015) discussed the challenges of communicating with the millennial generation and determined that religious organizations should spend less time fighting about what communication style is most appropriate and focus more on what communication approach will most effectively reach this generation for Jesus.

Overstreet (2010) explains that, statistically, millennials are seemingly interested in God and found value amongst religious organizations but pulled away from traditionalism and

mainstream religious institutions to seek a more authentic and palatable message. "According to the Higher Education Research Institute, more than three-quarters of today's young people believe in God, and over two-thirds say they have had a spiritual experience" (Overstreet, 2010, p. 3). However, Overstreet concluded that there is still a current phenomenon of millennials exiting the backdoor, damaging congregations, and discovered in that millennials would instead seek an individualistic experience with God in solitary confinement than be a part of a body of believers that proclaim messages of presumed authoritarian dogmatism.

Church Flourishment

Communication is a system working together for a common goal of understanding (Munodawafa, 2008). Religious communication functions in the same way. Spiritual organizational success is achieved through church health (Schoenber, 2017). Mills (2016) explained that religious organizations often lack fundamental church success because of an "atmosphere of ill health" (p. 68). "For lasting change to occur, church leaders and members must sense the situation's urgency and determine that doing nothing is worse than the anticipated pain of changing long-standing practices or traditions" (Mills, 2016, p. 68). Healthy churches are intentional about self-examination (Mills, 2010). However, what constitutes a healthy, thriving, flourishing communication culture within a church setting? Thiessen et al. (2019) explained that denominational and non-denominational leaders have are thriving based on numeric growth. Further, Thiessen et al. wrote, "Depending on the Christians tradition in question, there are several partially overlapping and conflicting pictures of what constitutes a flourishing congregation, evident in three overarching domains and several subsequent dimensions including organizational ethos, internal factors, outward variables, and supernatural discourse" (p. 13).

Powell et al. (2021) explained that churches that communicate in a palatable way at this point flourish. "Success is one of those words that people seem to use without giving much thought to what they're saying" (Schultz, 2017, p. 1). This research, specifically, seeks to understand church success better. It is challenging to try and objectively define success, though many judge congregational success on "worship attendees, baptisms, or giving amounts" (Schultz, p. 2). Further, Schultz argued that success might consist of an "increase in Bible study attendance and small group participation" (p. 2). If numerical growth is one of the key fundamental factors to building a successful religious organization, insights should be offered to explore how change occurs. Pillay (2020) wrote, "About every 500 years, the empowered structures of institutionalized Christianity, whatever they may be at the time, become an intolerable carapace that must be shattered so that renewal and new growth may occur" (p. 266). In an article from *Christianity Today,* Bonem (2012), in response to numerical growth, wrote,

> Several Jesus' parables – the mustard seed, the sower, the great banquet, the talents – have quantitative, measurable, or growth-oriented messages. This continues in the Book of Acts, where there are several references to the numerical growth of the church and where the church experiences specific geographic expansion. (n.p.)

Perrin et al. (1997) examined the growth of churches. They discovered that religious organizations succeed for several reasons (e.g., growth through birth, development through conversion, and reaffiliation). Each new attendee is a blessing that adds to the congregation's success.

In the book, *Effectiveness By The Numbers: Counting What Counts in the Church*, Hoyt (2007) wrote, "The numbers predict a likely future unless changes are made" (p. 1). Hoyt further

explained that numbers and are considered two of the highest success readings in many areas of life, and those considerations should be studied within religious organizations.

Andersen (2020) explained that growing churches are successful churches. Further, Andersen noted that churches with more attendees have a significant probability of financial sustainability.

Faith Communities Today conducted a study to determine how COVID-19 had affected local religious organizations and found that members gave less money when worship was only available online. With less money, there was less opportunity for ministry. However, once churches opened back up, many congregations noticed that the weekly attendance was lower, and the weekly offering was lower.

Church Health

As this research continues to examine the communication culture of religious organizations, it is important to elaborate on the definition of church health. Wilson (2016) explained that it is difficult to explain exactly what a healthy church looks like but offered a few suggestions to consider when observe the communication culture of a church.

> These markers are simple and attainable for churches that desire to pursue a healthier congregational life. The four characteristics are: (i) clarity of mission and vision, (ii) transformational conflict, (iii) authentic community, and (iv) transparent communication. When a church agrees to make these their highest priorities, the resulting congregational culture begins to exhibit signs of stability, renewal, and hope. Upon the foundation of such practices, the possibilities of future innovation, creativity, life transformation, and community engagement begin to emerge. (Wilson, 2016, p. 333)

Mbacham-Enow (2019) explained that healthy and flourishing churches are focused on a balance communication of efficiency and effectively balances "the right systems with the right people" (p. 43). When churches learn better to communication a culture of innovation, creativity, and numeric growth, churches often flourish in good health (Mbacham-Enow, 2019).

Van Engen (2014) suggested that the health of a church is contingent on its ability to communicate a love for people and a love for God. Healthy churches are intentional about reaching out to the masses and expressing unconditional and selfless concern (Van Engen, 2014). Churches often grow numerically when its culture communicates the anthropomorphic love and mercy of God (Van Engen, 2014). In the book *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, the author explained similarly that healthy churches maintain a primary focus on palatable communication because it is the foundation of the entire church culture (Denver, 2021).

Communication Builds Culture and Community

Carroggio (2021) explained that the identity of communication helps in building culture and community. "Culture is both a 'here and now' dynamic phenomenon and coercive background structure that influences us in multiple ways" (Schein, 2010, p. 3). Hepburn (2017) additionally explained that "communication contributes to the development of a shared understanding or organizational identity (p. 27). Roman-Gloro (2017) wrote that communication functions as a fulcrum (the support point on which a lever pivots). This metaphor is borrowed from Arnett and Holba, (2012) who supported "a dynamic process, which leads to the co-creation of meaning by individuals" (p. 9). Thus, communication plays a key role in the culture of communities. Communalities and organizations do well when intentionality is used in building a palatable communication plan (Croucher et al., 2015).

Marketing Skills

This study examined how religious organizations can achieve flourishment and thus it is critical to explore marketing opportunities for organizational benefit. Dorbala et al. (2018) suggested that often the most successful organizations succeed due to mastering the skill of marketing, specifically persuasive marketing. Dorbala et al. further stated that marketing is the art of convincing consumers to latch on to the subjective opportunity offered by an individual or an organization, and indeed, this is true regarding religion. Further, Dorbala et al. explained that marketing had been attached to religious organizations since the inception of faith. Busuttil (2017) said that Jesus used marketing techniques to draw in the populous with messages discussing redemption and love. Jesus understood the need to promote the power of God and expressed that marketing power through supernatural miracles (Busuttil, 2017). "Marketing is defined as promoting some product or service to sell that for a certain value in return" (Dorbala et al., p. 5852). Grönroos (1990) explained that marketing is a process of pulling an individual in the direction that benefits the puller (p. 3).

Coincidentally, one of the most exciting things about religious organizations, and religious ideology in general, is that these beliefs are created and predicated on the premise that there is a spiritual being omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, and Omni-benevolent (Dorbala et al., 2018). Benyah (2020) discussed that religious organization could gain a reachable influence with the charismatic right leader who knew how to offer palatable marketing toward this deity.

The Vulnerabilities of Human Cognition

Cialdini and Goldstein (2004) offered extensive research on persuasive stimuli and social influence and explored the psychological phenomenon of group compliance and conformity cognitive outcomes. "Some of the most memorable images from the field's history depict

participants struggling to comprehend their circumstances and respond according to their private judgments in external pressure to do otherwise" (Cialdini & Goldstein, p. 591). Krishna and Schwarz (2013) wrote, "People perceive the world through their senses, but the representations they construct from sensory inputs are not necessarily valid reflections of stimulus properties" (p. 162). Humans often have a broad set of core beliefs that are claimed as objectively and intrinsically correct, meaning they will be held on to tightly and concretely. However, persuasive marketing and propaganda tend to be a critical universal reason for shifting (Krishna & Schwarz, 2013). Dorbala et al. (2018) explained that religious organizational associations have examined human persuasion and found that there appear to be several key factors that have led to the success of a religious organization through such influences.

Sensory Marketing Persuasion

Sensory marketing persuasion is effective due to the potential ability of a charismatic leader, but also through physical appearance. "He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to Him, nothing in His appearance that we should desire Him (*English Standard Version*, 2001, Isaiah 53:2). Carvalho (2020) was fascinated with the described appearance of Jesus and explained that religious innovators were masterful at marketing Jesus as an ordinary teacher who would later persuade the common populous. Interestingly to note, however, Re et al. (2013) explained that individuals who have an appearance of commonality are often trusted more quickly than not. Individuals leading organizations, secular or spiritual, usually hold a more influential reach when the individual's outward appearance is similar to that of the audience (Re et al., 2013). Perhaps then, the God incarnate deity was presented in persuasive flesh and hopes of achieving noted commonality and trustworthiness.

Interestingly, religious organizations throughout history have been intentional regarding the outward appearance of the pastor as a way to market to the populous (Klassen, 2004). "A church-going people are a dress-loving people" (Schmidt, 1989, p. 36). Schmidt (1989) believed that members of a religious organization ought to dress to show the world how wonderful it is to be a member of God's call, and "clothing was one aspect of visual communication that was particularly vital" (p. 38). This notion stems from the 1651 Massachusetts Bay Colony leaders who believed that men and women should be "wearing gold and silver lace" to express individual status in all areas of life, specifically regarding the church (Schmidt, 1989, p. 39). Schmidt wrote, "Clothes make the man," which referenced the ploy to dress intentionally within religious organizations (p. 40). Schmidt further concluded that church clothing was meant to communicate status and appeal to different people. Morrison-Atkins (2021) stated, "In the cultural landscape of the ancient Mediterranean, clothing was not only a covering for the body but also functioned as an ideological system that worked to construct and stratify categories of identity and social roles" (p. 1).

In recent years some religious organizations have insisted on a more casual look in hopes of breaking down the "stratify categories of identity" (Schmidt, 1989, p. 1) and turning to communication that markets inclusivity to the unchurched world (Handayani, 2021, p. 300). "God, as the first designer, uses clothing as a symbol of redemption and salvation, and believers should think of fashion as a means of mission and ministry" (Handayani, p. 301). Izak (2021) conducted research that examined the clothing, songs, and stories of religious historicity and concluded that churches would likely connect with a culture when the culture is examined and marketed with relevance.

Further, building aesthetics make a difference regarding how a church flourishes or struggles. Cantwell (1962) that the design of buildings and sanctuaries plays a crucial role in church communication. A church building and its facilities indicate the type of church presented, specifically regarding personality (Cantwell, 1962). Hutterer (2017) similarly discovered that church design and architectural aesthetics play a crucial role in church communication. Church leaders build sanctuaries with the intentionality of offering beautiful acoustical experiences and prominent gathering places to experience and engage with each other (Hutterer, 2017). Further, Hutterer explained that often churches recently chose to negate the shotgun-style auditorium for a more communal welcoming space that helps communicate relationships and community amongst the members and guests. Building a collaborative environment is essential since the most flourishing churches are often intentional about sharing relational community (VanderWeele, 2017).

Church Social Media Marketing

Lim (2017) conducted research that examined the role of social media and how it has affected religious organizations. Lim noticed that individuals seeking a spiritual experience searched for that experience through media content channels. There was a time when many individuals attended a church primarily because of a personal influence (e.g., a family member or coach). However, due to the increase in social media and advancements in technology, some individuals today, specifically millennials, search for religious organizations on social media that meet personal needs (Lim, p. 27). Further, Lim conducted a sample survey of 37 churches to determine how effective Facebook had been the increase flourishment and found that the common denominator amongst all of these 37 religious organizations growing was the

individual's response to social media content (p. 30). In the book, *From Social Media to Social Ministry,* Jones (2020) stated:

> Finally, I could describe into words what I have been working on and what was in my heart: social ministry – helping churches go beyond using social technology to build their brand to using social technology to build God's kingdom. I knew it was going to be a radical concept for some because social media is largely viewed as an advertising platform: a quick, cheap, and often free way to broaden the reach and to get butts into seats on the weekends. Never mind that the first word in the phrase is *social*: many church leaders and communications professionals were initially hesitant to imagine social technology as anything more than a mechanism to broadcast information. (p. 2)

It seems appropriate for churches who are experiencing trials to consider a media channel to push communication ideology firmly. In the United States, there are over 275 million Facebook and Facebook Messenger users, over 121 million Instagram users, and over 80 million users on Twitter (Clement, 2020, para. 2). Social media channels were created in hopes gaining the user's time to influence the user's cognition for connection and connectivity (Chang et al., 2018, p. 287). Indeed, this type of definition can be perceived with negative communication connotations, and indeed, that is perceived in fairness (Chang et al., p. 287), however, being able to reach the masses for Jesus outweighs the negatives.

Animante et al. (2021) conducted a quantitative research analysis in Ghana to determine how social media had influenced the rising increase of Christianity amongst 152 new Christ converts and noted, "The introduction of social media has changed the mode of communication drastically, making it easier and more convenient to grow numerous churches, build effective ministries, offer publicized prays, and encourage and promote events" (p. 31). Further, Animante

et al. explained that through the technological innovations, in specific, regarding non-traditional interpersonal communication, new converted Christians in Ghana and around the world can now have constant oratorial encouragement and instructional content to continue in success (p. 31). Thus, media content used by religious organizations allows for the content to be accessible (Lim, 2017), convenient (Animante et al., 2021), and beneficial (Rončáková, 2013). In the book *Amusing Ourselves to Death,* Postman (1985) wrote, "the clearest way to see through a culture is to attend to its tools for conversation" (p. 8).

Persuasive Marketing Effectiveness

Communication is a working system functioning for common understanding (Munodawafa, 2008). Dorbala et al. (2018) suggested that the most successful organizations often find success within persuasive marketing work. Klucharev et al. (2008) conducted research that examined brain mechanisms and neural processes in hopes of discovering what effects persuasion can have on human understanding and wrote, "Human behavior is affected by various forms of persuasion" (p. 353). The study used an MRI (magnetic resonance imaging device) for examination and determined that even one single exposure to expert propagandized persuasion can shift adult cognition (Klucharev et al., 2008). This discovery allowed researchers, specifically neuroscientists, to understand better that effectiveness and persuasive marketing can affect human emotive systems and psychological and intellectual cognitive reasoning (Klucharev et al., p. 359).

Falk et al. (2010), UCLA researchers, studied social cognition. When researching the dorsomedial prefrontal cortex area of the brain, they discovered that humans are constantly at a disadvantage due to the increasingly effective capability of persuasion and persuasive messaging (p. 8421). "Our data are consistent with the notion that if you can get someone to step into your

shoes psychologically, you might be halfway home in terms of persuading them to see the content of the message the way you want them to" (Falk et al., 2010, p. 8423). Cacioppo et al. (2016) more aggressively explained that the art of persuasion is to change a person's core belief systems intentionally. The art of persuasion has become so successful and increasingly effective that individuality is seemingly slipping away to a more self-absorbed and narcissistic robotic cloning of societal inhabitants (Cacioppo et al., 2016).

This persuasive art shift is caused primarily by the inescapability of social influence, mainly due to the increasing impact of technology in the world (Fairclough, 1986). Haddock et al. (2008) conducted a series of cognitive-based persuasive experiments to learn the depths of persuasive powers and found that effective marketing persuasion can dictate the thinking and moods of consumers. Thus, with proper persuasive tactics, marketing orators can gain influence over the decision-making of others (Haddock et al., 2008).

Bakir et al. (2018) agreed and wrote, "Organized persuasive communication is essential to the exercise of power at the national and global level" (p. 311). Organizations and institutions that cannot persuade and gain intellectual and cognitive influence over a client or consumer will be less effective than those who can learn to achieve this task (Bakir et al., 2018).

The Ethics of Persuasion

Hashimoto (1985) recorded an excerpt from Corder (1980) regarding the ethics of persuasion:

> You are, at the least, obligated not to be ignorant, not to be dogmatic, not to be arrogant. You must explain fully, offer carefully collected evidence, and reason logically. You must disclaim coercion, manipulation, and image-making. You must welcome, not threaten; disclose, not deceive; be generous, not hostile. You must, in your argument,

make a common world, with room in it for yourself and your reader. (Corder, 1980, as

cited in Hashimoto, 1985, p. 231).

Hashimoto (1985) believed that the persuasive marketing shift from the 20th century was

negatively infiltrating mass media communication due to its evident ability to persuade

humanistic cognition negatively. Coincidentally, the cultural norms of persuasion often have

sustainable ideologies.

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Theoretical Framework

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Communication is an elusive term to grasp fully. As communication avenues have

blossomed, the researchers desire to make sense of them. Researching communication is like

researching any discipline of study and is achieved by employing observation and interpretation

(Zerfass et al., 2018). Zerfass et al. also stated that communication researchers work very

similarly in gathering facts about human behavior that can be verified, integrated, and interpreted

through rigorous testing. Through these areas of testing, information is considered reliable and

relevant. Lewis (1970) referred to these tests and propositions as theoretical frameworks,

specifically relating to communication studies. Longo and Soto (2017) explained that theories

are the phenomenon bridges that seemingly connect organisms to explanation. In specific,

communication theories offer greater understanding due to their conceptual framework to

eliminate ambiguity and elusiveness, often leading to a significant understood aspect of human

engagement (Zerfass et al., 2018). Walter et al. (2018) noted that theories, specifically

communication theories, are pathways of cognitive processing that often lead to critical thinking.

Craigs Communication Traditions

"Communication theory is enormously rich in the range of ideas that fall within the

nominal scope" (Craig, 1999, p. 119). Craig (1999) funneled the small scope of communication

studies into seven traditional categories, rhetorical, semiotic, phenomenological, cybernetic, sociopsychological, sociocultural, and critical. This communication study that explores the experiences of a church-goer at a flourishing church was situated in the phenomenological tradition.

Phenomenological Tradition

Craig (1999) explained that the phenomenological tradition "is an exposition of the communicative process as it takes place in experience" (p. 138). Phenomenology is a qualitative research methodology that seeks to understand participants' experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Further, Creswell and Poth (2018) stated, "a phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept of a phenomenon" (p. 74). The primary goal of this proposed research methodology tradition is to identify the communication strategies used among the flourishing churches versus those struggling. Yadav (2018) stated, "Phenomenological research helps to highlight an individual's field perspective and knowledge of the phenomenon" (p. 364). Using the qualitative phenomenological tradition will help to offer insights into what churches can do to flourish in a time of evident church struggle (Earls, 2021). The exploratory nature of the in-person context makes this research method and tradition an appropriate means to gather information within a theoretical framework.

ELM Theory

The elaboration likelihood model theory (ELM) is credited to Richard E. Petty and John T. Cacioppo (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). ELM was developed in the 1970s by cofounders of social neuroscience, John Cacioppo and Richard Petty. (Morris et al., 2005, p. 79). The elaboration likelihood model theory is a persuasive theory that seeks to understand how an

experience affects a group (Morris et al., 2005). However, Kitchen et al. (2014) believed that

using the ELM often led researchers to examine experience through an "intuitive or conceptual

leap" (p. 2037). ELM is a persuasive model used in research to help explain how people are

persuaded to change their way of living and engaging (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Cyr et al.

(2018) used the ELM theory to examine online persuasion through website design by exploring

"the effects of argument quality as a central route to influence attitude change versus design and

social elements as peripheral routes to attitude change" (n.p.). The function of this research from

Cyr et al. was to understand better if communication argument or communication design leads to

user persuasion. Teng et al. (2014) used the ELM theory to help conceptualize persuasive

messages within social media by examining central and peripheral routes of the social media

environment. Teng et al. (2014) stated, "ELM is considered a feasible and useful approach to

elucidate the persuasive information process by consumers in the social media context" (p. 1).

Regarding religious organizational flourishment, Lim (2017) conducted a sample survey of 37

churches to determine how effective Facebook had been and found that the common

denominator amongst all these 37 religious organizations growing was the individual's response

to social media content (p. 30).

ELM Used in Phenomenological research.

Azanin (2020) used the ELM theory to see how advertisements on social media would

affect a user. Using a qualitative methodology with a phenomenological design helped discover

that ads are increasingly compelling for persuasion in social media (Azanin, 2020). Similarly,

Zheng (2020) used the ELM theory to research the phenomenon of when and why negative

emotional appeals work in advertising. Zheng (2020) found that one of the primary functions of

persuasion is to play on an individual's emotions through sensory appeals. Susmann et al. (2021)

offered insights from the ELM within research discussing the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic. They explained that emotions are often the most powerful tool to persuade and change societal living. Rocklage et al. (2018) stated, "People possess a learned association between emotion and persuasion that spontaneously shifts their language toward more emotional appeals, even when such appeals may be suboptimal" (p. 749).

This proposed dissertation research explores how communication strategies promote church buy-in. The elaboration likelihood model is a theory of influence with a two-fold meaning of exploring human action's central and peripheral routes (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). First, the central route of the ELM theory examines when people have taken the time to analyze and contemplate whatever is being offered and what that may mean for the individual (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Further, Petty and Cacioppo (1986) explained the second route of the ELM, the peripheral route, which is examined when people are rushed into a decision at hand due to it often feeling trivial. The compilation of the central and peripheral routes within ELM theory will offer a rounded examination of how this flourishing church phenomenon occurs.

Numerical Flourishment

Similarly, Jackson (2019) researched the intricacies of intentional and purposeful pastors engaging an audience with a communication homiletic marinated in the cultural dialogue. The study examined charismatic orators within religious organizations who made it clear that when preaching to audiences today, specific to the millennial generations and younger pastors and other religious communicators will be influential when offering a message that has been tailored explicitly toward that audience (p. 148). Further, Jackson noted that finding successful numerical growth amongst intergenerational religious organizations will become increasingly challenging

between traditionalists and digital natives due to the inherent opposition of media differentiation (p. 148).

Shercliff (2020) explained that religious organizations should consider finding unified connection points as opposed to focusing on differing views, primarily since biblical communication is defined as "the art of engaging the people of God in their shared narrative by creatively and hospitably inviting them into an exploration of the biblical text, by means of which, corporately and individually, they might encounter the Divine" (p. 48). Further, Shercliff explained that offering a shared narrative might be achieved when individuals see the benefits of both traditional orthodoxies when presented with a new-age media communication style.

Yip and Ainsworth (2013) conducted research that explored how mega-churches in Singapore market to the populace. Yip and Ainsworth discovered the challenges of intergenerational religious communities relatively instantaneously and found that when there is marketing balance, flourishment often happens.

Webb (2012) stated, "to grow in a society where individuals and families have freedom of choice, religious organizations must put forth concerted efforts to master and implement the principles of marketing applied by successful businesses and mega-churches" (p. 69). In the secular world, if a business is struggling to sell a product or the leadership team is subpar, actions are taken to ensure the organization maintains its historicity while also avoiding losing needed traction, and this type of mentality ought to be communicated within the life of religious organizations as well (Webb, 2012).

Financial Flourishment

While investigating what the research says about how religious organizations build sustainable numerical growth, the study suggested that financial development often follows

(Keister, 2003). Further, in a separate article, Keister (2008) explained that culturally oriented individuals often seek to ensure that culture remains unchanged sociologically. Individuals seeking a religious community seek an organization that allows them to physically engage and interact through integration and interpretation of biblical content and desire a complete and holistic engagement (Keister, 2008).

Michaelson et al. (2015) explained that participation within a religious organization, and specific, financial participation, often is expressed when leaders communicate how many financial means are needed and what the financial contributions will be used for. Further, Michaelson et al. explained that some Christians believe in the imperative to give taken from Pauline literature, which states:

Now about the collection for the Lord's people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to

do. On the first day of every week, each of you should set aside a sum of money in

keeping with your income, saving it up, so that when I come, no collections will have to

be made. (*New International Version*, 1984, I Corinthians 16:1-2)

This messaging is aligned with what the Apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Church at Corinth:

Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows

generously will also reap well. You should give what you have decided in your heart to

give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God can

bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will

abound in every good work. (*New International Version*, 1984, II Corinthians 9:6-8)

Lunn et al. (2001) examined a case study of the Presbyterian Church. They found that the primary reason those associated with the Presbyterian Church gave was not so much in believing in church benevolence but primarily because they thought it was an imperative from Jehovah.

Regnerus et al. (1988) explained that if religious organizations want to build sustainable financial solvency, leadership teams and pastors must communicate the organization's financial goals. Further, Regnerus et al. noted that the religious organizations that have accomplished financial solutions of achieving the congregational benevolent goals were often the same organizations that contributed to the needs within societal parameters. Contributing to societal needs appears to reflect the messaging of II Corinthians 9:7, coincidentally.

Summary

Religious organizations that seek to achieve numerical growth, financial solvency, and programming efficiency must understand a few fundamental concepts to accomplishing this goal. Religious organizations, specifically those seeking sustainable success in the 21st-century, need to understand the value and necessity of communication persuasive marketing (Dorbala et al., 2018, p. 5851). Communication influential marketing within a religious organization compilation of charismatic persuasive influencers and accessible marketing media ecology (Schlatter, 1941, p. 898). Further, Nolan et al. (2008) explained a humanistic trait of craved acceptance and belonging, which helps explain why people seek religious organizations that cognitively help personal needs (p. 915). Therefore, religious organizations should offer communicative rhetoric that markets relevance alongside biblical correctness and precision within a religious organization (McMurray & Simmers, p. 76). The theoretical framework was built using ELM to explore how communication persuasion and communication experience can lead to results. Further, this framework offers a foundation that has led to a greater understanding of whether pulpit persuasion (homiletic communication) is the key to religious organizational success or if communication experiences are the critical success factor. These points will focus on the platform persuasions that were expanded upon in achieving those successes.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Overview

This study aimed to understand communication themes observed in flourishing church cultures. By exploring flourishing churches, this study will offer a qualitative ethnographical design that analyzes and reports on what communication styles are being offered and how those styles are marketed to the congregation. Religious organizations have dwindled in the last several years (Earls, 2021, n.p.). The elaboration likelihood model will inform the identity dynamics of this research by illuminating the differences between non-healthy and healthy flourishing churches. ELM will allow this researcher to see how a communication phenomenon could be categorized as a primary data path, a secondary emotional path, or a combination of both. This research, then, seeks to provide an in-depth ethnographical examination of the researcher's experiences taken from church observation. For clarity, the observations uncovered within this methodology will uncover common themes and practices that might be useful to churches that desire to transform their culture through communication.

Research Method and Design

Research Method and Phenomenological Tradition

Patton (2015) stated, "A phenomenological study (as opposed to a phenomenological perspective) is one that focuses on descriptions of what people experience and how it is that they experience what they experience" (p. 117). Qualitative research is an investigative process where a social phenomenon is examined by differentiating, comparing, and classifying the object of the study (Miles & Humberman, 1984). Aspers and Corte (2019) stated, "We define qualitative research as an iterative process in which improved understanding to the scientific community is achieved by making new significant distinctions resulting from getting closer to the phenomenon

studied" (p. 139). Creswell and Poth (2018) explained that using the qualitative research methodology is challenging due to its elusiveness. "Qualitative research is defined as the study of the nature of phenomenon, including their quality, different manifestations, the context in which they appear or the perspectives from which they can be perceived" (Busetto et al., 2020, p. 1). Sutton and Austin (2015) further explained that qualitative research allows for cultural collaboration that often becomes increasingly beneficial regarding research findings and thus an appropriate methodology to consider for a research analysis or proposal.

Phenomenology is a qualitative research methodology that seeks to understand participants' experiences and context perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Further, Creswell and Poth (2018) stated, "a phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept of a phenomenon" (p. 74). The primary goal of this proposed research methodology tradition is to understand the experience of a guest or regular attendee at flourishing churches. Yadav (2018) stated, "Phenomenological research helps to highlight an individual's field perspective and knowledge of the phenomenon" (p. 364). Using the qualitative phenomenological tradition will help to offer insights into what churches can do to flourish in a time of evident church struggle (Earls, 2021). The exploratory nature of the in-person context makes this research method and tradition an appropriate means to gather information.

Sampling Selection

In this proposed study, the researcher visited a category of churches to collect data. Data was collected from this researcher becoming a participant-observer making direct observations and personally experiencing the church's environment. As indicated, this study considers

flourishing churches. It should be noted that there are complexities in measuring what constitutes a flourishing church.

After Peter had preached and established the Christian Church at Pentecost in the book of Acts, the church exploded, and "those who received his word were added that day about three thousand souls" (*English Standard Version*, 2001, Acts 2:40-41). Further, Luke explained that the Christian church continued to flourish by growing in number day by day (*English Standard Version*, 2001, Acts 2:47). It appears that flourishing churches growing numerically (Acts 2:47), which leads to a growth in financial ability (Acts 2:45) and in ministry (Acts 2:42).

This study examined two categories of churches for a more well-rounded insight into church flourishment. These two categories covered churches that were found within the parameters of the *Outreach Magazine* Top-100 list, examining the fastest-growing, and largest, churches.

The outreach 100 is a celebration of numbers but far more. It is the story of individuals finding new life, sometimes through the ministry of rapidly growing churches and sometimes through the strategic church planting efforts of kingdom-minded churches of all sizes. Some churches were not labeled a "mega-church," yet were also flourishing (McGowan, 2018). Thus, flourishment and thriving churches can happen in any sized church. However, the purpose of this study followed the *Outreach Magazine* standards. This type of explanation helps define even greater what a flourishing church is meant. Data was collected to differentiate between what is working and what seems to be inadequate.

Categories of Churches

Boddy (2016) stated, "The issue of what constitutes an appropriate sample size in qualitative research is only really answerable within the context and scientific paradigm of the

research being conducted" (p. 430). This research sought to build a positivist qualitative research

that considers multiple churches within a multiple-state sample in the United States that are

pulled from the Top-100 *Outreach Magazine* church list, for producing an understanding of the

good health and thriving church phenomenon.

Direct Observation

Anderson (2010) explained that though qualitative research is subjective, there is still a

need for reliability and variable control when possible. Each of these visits was in person with

repeatable, controlled variables. The church was visited unannounced. On each visit, this

researcher parked in visitor/guest parking to indicate to the parking lot team (if there was a

parking lot team) the nature of the visit. Further, each time this researcher visited a church, the

researcher entered through the main door fifteen minutes early before the worship began.

Entrance through the main entrance allowed the church team to offer whatever offerings may

have been available to outsiders. Each of the examined churches was visited during the Sunday

morning worship time. The researcher brought a handheld recorder and a notebook to record

real-time notes describing the atmosphere and culture of the church and its membership. A

systematic checklist was created to ensure it is intentional for noting specific critical aspects of

the experience at every church.

Research Design

The focus of this design was to offer a qualitative ethnographical design. Creswell and

Poth (2018) stated, "An ethnographer focuses on an entire culture-sharing group" (p. 90). Each

church was seen as having its own unique culture. The culture was observed and experienced to

help make sense of it and understand how it was built and maintained. The ethnographical design

approach in qualitative research seeks to explore the shared meanings of the group and takes a

unique interest in the emotive concepts of a study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The primary function of an ethnographic design is to build a holistic commonality of the group to explore systemically its significant components, which leads to the adequate discovery of the culture (Reeves et al., 2013).

Further, Reeves et al. (2013) suggested that the ethnography design in qualitative methodology is, in its most simplistic practice, the study of people in their environment using methods like participant observation and traditional interpersonal communication questioning. Reeves et al. and is an excellent tool for collecting social science phenomena insights. Since ethnography examines specific societal processes and interactions (Creswell & Poth, 2018), this researcher visited churches to explore in person and real-time the cultural communication of flourishing churches. This researcher visited each church's Sunday morning worship services and attended only when the senior pastor (e.g., teaching pastor) was preaching.

Further, this study focused on what can be explicitly observed through the lived experience of the worship service rather than the communication strategies offered outside of the service, such as small groups, social media, or direct text. This research was limited to the worship service experience alone but recognizes that church culture is complex and multifaceted. Many of the observed churches had multi-site and multi-service church campuses, which could affect the culture. Steffaniak (2020) wrote, "It is metaphysically impossible for multi-site and multi-service churches to exist as the numerically same church. Each multi-site or multi-service entity is its own numerically distinct local church" (p. 107). Thus, this study observed and noted the lived experience within the service attended. The identity of the churches being visited was kept anonymous to protect the churches observed.

Outreach Magazine Top-100

This study categorically examined churches that were thriving and maintaining good health by considering three groups of churches offered by *Outreach Magazine*. As noted, this list was not meant to limit any church. Thriving churches are not limited to the *Outreach Magazine* Top-100 list. However, this study examined and reported only on the churches listed within the *Outreach Magazine* Top-100 list. The categories examined from this list include the fastest-growing churches and the largest churches. Since communication builds culture, this researcher observed and experienced the culture within these churches to explore and connect how communication works to contribute to a church's flourishment.

Organizing Data

The data collected was analyzed and organized in a categoric system. A systematic checklist was created to ensure intentionality in noting specific vital aspects of the experience at every church to offer reliability and validity. Creswell and Poth (2018) stated, "Qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under the study, and data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns" (p. 42). This researcher observed the communication culture within the church setting by inductively "collaborating with the participants interactively so that they have a chance to shape the themes or abstractions that emerge from the process" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 43). This researcher charted each theme and pattern as it was being experienced and categorized the findings systematically. As this researcher observed and participated in this experience examining the communication culture of healthy and flourishing churches, the data collected was organized and stored on an external hard drive and locked in an office cabinet along with any additional written notes. The researcher's goal was focused around

the mindset, "If communication builds culture, then I must experience that culture." Below is the systematic list used as this researcher observed and participated within the communication culture of the churches being explored:

- What was communication with the outside aesthetics?

- Were there people outside communicating help for new guests?

- What signage was used to communicate to guests on the outside/inside?

- Was the parking lot cleaned (trees trimmed, grass cut, painted, sign worked, etc.)?

- Were there places for guests to park or transportation within the parking lot?

- Did anyone speak to me when I was in the parking lot? Front door? How many?

- Was there an information desk communicating the culture of the church?

- Were there interior signs and banners helping with offering direction?

- What type of clothing was worn and communicated?

- What was the age and gender of the door/parking lot greeters? Intergenerational?

- Was there an area for kids and how was that communicated (signs, colors, name tags, etc.)?

- Did worship teams have the words on the screen for singing/praise?

- Were scriptures placed on the screen during the message to follow along or did the pastor communicate for the members to use their Bible app to follow?

- Were there goody bags for guests and how was that communicated?

- What was in the bag and what did that communicate?

- Was there a team to specifically seek out new guests? What did they look like?

- Did the church have pre-worship music? post-worship?

- How was information gathered from guests for a follow-up?

Assumptions

This researcher expected flourishing churches to have patterns of church members serving people in the parking lot (e.g., parking lot greeters, golf-cart drivers who pick up families, and security to help enter and exit). Further, this researcher expected to see flourishing churches with team members who are easily accessible to provide help to all. This researcher also expected to see aesthetics within flourishing churches, such as coffee bars, lights, and intentional greeter attractiveness. These items were categorically analyzed and systematically charted in big bucket categories.

Theoretical Frameworks

Green (2014) stated, "Theoretical and conceptual frameworks need to be more clearly understood by researchers and correct terminology used to ensure clarity for novice researchers" (p. 34). Vinz (2020) simplified a qualitative theoretical construct by discussing three major components of the research: (1) identifying key concepts, (2) evaluating and explaining relevant theories (3) showing how existing research and past ideas can help formulate new thoughts. This research proposed to examine what communication themes are observed in healthy, flourishing church cultures.

Evaluating and Explaining Relevant Theories

This research explored the fundamental communication strategies that most significantly affect the health and flourishment of religious organizations. Under the guidance of the elaboration likelihood model theory, this proposed research seeks to determine how religious organizations channel verbal and non-verbal communication toward building and maintaining the church's culture. Further, through the lens of ELM, this researcher examined the peripheral cues regarding the exogenous variables to see how the communication culture variables persuade

the populous or if church members are considerably more focused on the homiletic itself (e.g.,

centrally based), which leads to persuasive change.

Further, this theoretical construct aligned the ELM with the *liking principle*, introduced

by Robert Cialdini in 1984. Cialdini and Goldstein (2002) described the liking principle as a

compelling, persuasive tactic to "govern how one person might influence another" (p. 40).

People are more likely to come in proximity with those they like (Cialdini & Goldstein, p. 40).

This was important in examining, as stated, the personality and characteristic traits of the

membership who were intentionally made public to the guest.

Reflexivity

In conducting a qualitative study, the researcher's primary responsibility for collecting

information requires cognizance, cultural awareness, and ownership of the researcher's

perspective. Dodgson (2019) explained, "If a researcher clearly describes the intersecting

contextual relationships between the participants and themselves (reflexivity), it not only

increases the creditability of the findings but also deepens our understanding of the work" (p.

220). The researcher visited churches acknowledged within the stated three categorical groups

from the *Outreach Magazine* Top-100 list, which helped shaped framework regarding why

churches flourish. The efforts of this researcher were to preserve objective integrity during the

church observations and participation. However, being predisposed to churches offering personal

excitement and boredom could have created bias with regard to the research experience and data

interpretation. Further, some of the sample churches visited either resonated with or stretched the

comfort level of the researcher due to pre-ideological patterns and bias, especially as the

researcher observed and participated in each church service.

Limitations

Terrell (2016) defined limitations as "constraints outside of the control of the researcher and inherent to the actual study that could affect the generalizability of the results" (p. 42). While this research offered practical insights into the communication culture of flourishing, this research was not without limitations. This study cannot account for all factors that create a healthy church but did locate some helpful communication-centric practices that could be helpful to some churches.

First, this research discusses the role of the Holy Spirit within flourishing churches, but this research design is limited in knowing exactly how that works. The Holy Spirit is active and present in the interworkings of the church; however, these workings are often beyond the understanding of human cognition (Ellis, 2006). Perhaps future research could explore how the theological variable of the Holy Spirit affects communication cultural behavior.

Secondly, while this study points to some interesting themes, they are not generalizable due to the qualitative nature of this investigation. Also, while this study examined a blend of churches, there is still the understanding that religious institutions are complex and multifaceted, with complexities in measuring what constitutes a healthy, flourishing church.

Finally, this study was limited to a specific parameter of the church experience. Future studies might examine the online church communication culture and its significance to address this limitation and advance theory on this topic.

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Summary

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This research aimed to explain how this researcher researched churches to learn what communication themes helped with flourishing church cultures. By exploring flourishing churches, this study offered a qualitative ethnographical design that analyzes and reports on what

phenomenological communication styles are being offered and how those styles are marketed to the congregation. Religious organizations have dwindled and struggled with flourishment in the last several years (Earls, 2021, n.p.). The ELM framework helped inform this research's identity dynamics by illuminating what makes for a healthy and flourishing church. This research sought to provide an in-depth ethnographical examination of the researcher's experiences taken from, in part, visiting churches and taking notes in real-time that hopefully will lead to helping grow the Kingdom of God and the local church.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

American business investor and philanthropist diplomat, Walter Annenberg quoted, "I shall participate, I shall contribute, and in so doing, I will be the gainer" (The Council of Professional Supply Chain Management Professionals, 2017). In response to this idea, this researcher spent 2022 examining flourishing churches found in the Top-100 list of the *Outreach Magazine* as an active participant. This research provides an in-depth ethnographical examination of the researcher's experiences from visiting churches and taking notes in real-time that hopefully will lead to helping grow the Kingdom of God and the local church. This was accomplished by observing the way communication built the church's culture.

Overview

This study's primary goal was to investigate flourishing churches' communication and cultural elements. The potential of church attendance to advance objective morality necessitates regular attendance by people (Bruce, 2017; Koenig, 2012; Richardson, 2021; Vanderweele & Case, 2021). This study investigated ten flourishing churches to see what communication themes are prevalent in their cultures. Future church leaders and members will benefit from the scholarly knowledge provided by this qualitative study as they develop their communicative experiences with God.

This study looked at the communication patterns in flourishing church cultures. Although religious organizations vary based on practices and those in charge, central leanings can offer valuable insight into effective methods. A qualitative technique was used in this study to investigate the communication phenomena.

Description of Participants: Churches A-J

As previously stated, the purpose of this qualitative ethnographic study was to learn what communication themes are expressed within the culture of a flourishing church and how understanding these communication themes might benefit others. Each of these churches is listed as a separate participant. Furthermore, to maintain ethical confidentiality, this researcher has concealed the identities of the churches under investigation. Thus, the ten churches observed in this inquiry will be referred to as Church A through J. This section will provide a more thorough introduction to these notable churches. Of interest, this researcher only attended the main campus of each of the participant churches.

Church A – Nashville, TN

Church A is a young and vibrant church located in one of the fastest-growing areas of East Nashville. This community is filled with earthly tones, CBD pop-up stores, and BBQ-loving millennials. The streets in this area are lined with sidewalks and bike lanes. This church reflects a new generation of Nashville residents who have moved into freshly renovated homes organically built in the 50s. The main campus building reflects a contemporary and modern design.

Church A had three meeting times on Sunday for those wanting to attend in-person worship (e.g., 9:00 am, 11:00 am, and 5:30 pm). The church sign was enormous and easily seen from the interstate. When turning into campus, the church had a parking lot team, primarily made up of people dressed in reflective yellow security vests, directing traffic flow. The security team offered direction and safety for those visiting, especially for the first time.

After parking, team members with identical church t-shirts drove around in golf carts, offering to pick up anyone seeking to avoid walking to the lobby. Once arriving at the main entrance, layers of team members stood outside, ready to offer a smile and a kind word. The

greeters at the doors did not ask people if they were new or regulars but instead greeted everyone

with relational warmth. However, there were so many different layers of greeters smiling and

welcoming that some signage went unnoticed.

The grand lobby was filled with multiple coffee stations, a greeter's gift area, kids zone

entrances, and a room with "Team Members." It was assumed that the team likely gathered there

to review the day's plans. The lobby wall colors were neutral, with soft greys and dark blues.

Signs were hanging from the ceilings and on the walls that offered directions to the classes,

bathrooms, and auditorium. Further, people were standing in the same team member church t-

shirts at attention and ready to offer help to anyone who needed it. These members were not

pushy, and this researcher noticed that the team did not initiate conversations but instead stood

and waited for anyone to come to them. It seemed to communicate a culture of servanthood

marinated in negated aggression. Church A sought softer communication with non-verbal

evidence of support.

The auditorium was only a few steps from the main lobby. This researcher followed the

signs to the entrance and entered the great room. The room's darkness penetrated the smoke-like

multiple-colored lights that landed on a lifted stage. Guitars, keyboards, and a drum set sat on the

stage. It looked like a concert offered in an arena or theater.

When entering the auditorium a few minutes early, no musicians played the instruments

on the stage, but the music played over the speakers hanging throughout the room. The music

was contemporary and noticeably loud. The loud music communicated a culture of energy and

comfort. Often, entering a church with bright light and silence can be intimidating (Shahidi et al.,

2021); however, Church A avoided that discomfort, presumably with intentionality.

When the worship was getting ready to begin, there was a five-minute countdown displayed across all the screens. This researcher noticed that the worship leader started the communication as soon as the clock hit zero. Starting on time communicated the church's desire to respect the audience. The songs sung were beautiful, with the words on the screens displayed. The worship team encouraged the audience to sing. Coincidentally, Church A displayed song lyrics, Bible verses, and message points.

The speaker spoke with dynamic orality and passion. The lights lifted when the pastor began his message (remaining soft and dark during the entirety of the singing portion). The pastor wore skinny jeans, and a "Jesus Saves" fitted t-shirt with designer Nike shoes. Furthermore, he spoke without a podium or microphone stand but instead stood on the stage with a rolled-in television and a Bible in hand. The informal clothing communicated a culture of normalcy and authenticity. Wearing a t-shirt and jeans is not the only way to express authenticity; however, this pastor looked like everyone in the room. This communicated inclusion and safety without aggressive judgment. Noticeably the members wore similar informal clothing. Of interest, this researcher did not see anyone in formal clothing at Church A. The service ended with a prayer from the pastor, and this researcher left the auditorium and entered back into the grand lobby. Bags were hanging in the center of the foyer with a sign that said, "First Time Guest." This researcher took a bag but kept it concealed to avoid talking to anyone about the visit. However, inside the bag was a coffee mug with the church logo. Similar teams in the lobby had designated t-shirts offering people encouragement for a good week. The outside crew was ready to direct cars back out of the parking lot.

Church B – Plano, TX

Church B is a well-established, non-denominational church located in the heart of Plano. The church's exterior was classy and relevant, offering beautiful color schemes. The church reflects the Texas culture with contemporary aesthetics exposed as a larger-than-life atmosphere. Worship is on Friday at 7:00 pm and Sunday at 9:00 am and 11:00 am. The church sits off a significant road and can be seen from the exit ramp. The church buildings' design complements many shapes, colors, and building materials. Further, mature trees have grown up and blended into the sleek curvature of the grand entrance. The outside of the building was decorated with creative colors exposing non-traditional shades of orange, red, and purple. This creative design communicates a culture of fun and excitement.

The outside parking lot offered signage and painted pavement displaying where to park and in which direction to go. The building was easily accessible. The parking lot team stood at the entrances and helped funneling the traffic quickly. This researcher could see huge flags flapping in the wind, which caught the attention quickly, communicating where visitors were to park. There were team members close to the visitor section welcoming newcomers. The church team members dressed casually and wore identifying lanyards that displayed the word greeter across the tag. Further, the greeters were a good blend of older and younger people. Intergenerational on display communicated a culture of total inclusion as it intentionally displayed intergenerational demographics. Across the prominent entrance, area signage indicated the door visitors were to walk through.

A two-story, colorful slide was the first visual seen inside the church building, that seemed to intentionally funnel visitors toward this kid-focused element. This image was excellent and located directly in the line of sight from the visitor entrance. This area was called

the "Kid Zone" with a massive sign in soft yellow and blue colors. The entire room exposed vibrant colors complimented with a double-decker purple slide. A skyline mural hung on the back wall over the entrance to the classroom space.

Across from the kid zone was an area called *The Hub*. The hub was the welcome center attended by the church team, welcoming people, and offering gifts to the newcomer. Inside the gift bag was an insulated mug with the church logo. The hub sat on a stained cement floor with accents of tile and carpet. The color schemes on the floor made the space feel clean and exciting. The design of the walls and chandeliers was neutral and contemporary. There were pop-up booths near the windows promoting church events and small group sign-ups in the foyer. These marketing materials were vibrant banners with ministries in bold green and red colors. Several people in the sign-up areas had lanyards with the church name to assist anyone in need.

A coffee bar area was just past the signage stations promoting the church ministries. The coffee area was self-serve, with pre-made coffee in black coffee tanks for anyone to consume. There were also bottles of water.

Walking back toward the central entrance area exposed several doors to the auditorium. Music filled the room and aligned with a dimly light ambiance. The chairs sat in a semi-circle stadium seating design. There were video announcements playing on repeat while also playing a five-minute timer to prepare for the worship to start.

The stage was lit with stage lighting, though the auditorium never seemed over dark. The lights danced with the music, and the worship team was a qualified vocalist group. The words appeared on the screens behind the band for audience participation. This church offered a blend of traditional hymns and contemporary worship songs, which matched the blend of the crowds' demographics.

A high table and chair accompanied the pastor on the stage. There was no television aid. However, the pastors' notes and Bible verses were displayed on the large screens like the songs. The pastor dressed in dark jeans and wore a button-down, tucked-in shirt. Like the pastor, the crowd dressed in business casual.

After the sermon, the pastor prayed and dismissed the audience with the help of another team member. The band played a few more minutes after the conclusion of the message.

When the audience exited, the lights were lifted high, and the lobby greeters opened doors and thanked everyone for coming. Many children started playing on the slide as most of the crowd headed for the parking lot. The parking lot team and police officers assisted with traffic.

Church C – Alpharetta, GA

Church C was an established, non-denominational church located in the center of Alpharetta, about ten miles from downtown Atlanta, GA. The church looked sleek and contemporary, covered in large windows, and lined with a beautiful parking lot aligned with mature trees. This building was easily seen from the main intersections. Outside the parking lot, near the main road, there were descriptive signs indicating how to get to the main entrance. When people arrived on campus, the parking lot was marked with colored letters, which helped them remember where to find cars after they left. There were also parking lot team members directing traffic outside. The grass had been freshly cut, and the parking lot indicators appeared to have been freshly painted. An entire front section for visitors to park in was ideal because the parking lot was extremely large.

The main entrance to the building was parallel to visitor parking. The lobby felt like it was the size of a Home Depot. There were community areas for people to sit and interact around

the lobby. These community areas offered a playhouse design element. The church used a two-by-four wood frame to construct what appeared to be a three-dimensional house emerging from the wall, complete with an actual deck railing that extended several feet beyond the playhouse decoration. There are two or more rocking chairs on the porch design, with a table(s) in the center. There was a coffee station and some small refreshments available for everyone. This grand foyer displayed signage informing people where to go after leaving the lobby.

This researcher exited the lobby and entered the auditorium. The auditorium was a large and dark room. The chairs were as dark as the room, making it difficult to find a seat. Ushers stood at the doors with flashlights, walking people to available seating. Background contemporary Christian music played loudly over the speakers as the audience waited for the worship to begin. The music was so loud that this researcher overheard several people complaining.

This church had an interesting mix of older and younger people. The majority, however, appeared to be in their 40s and 50s. There was a countdown on the screens above the stage, and when it reached zero, a video announcement welcomed the congregation to church. This person was lovely and bubbly. It communicated with the youth within the church's leadership team. Almost twenty people joined the stage and played for the worship. However, the room felt even darker as the multi-colored spotlight lights shone down on the stage.

The worship team and the speakers were both very loud. When this researcher looked around, he noticed that most churchgoers were not singing along with the band on stage, perhaps because some songs were new. The church provided lyrics for people to sing, but the noise level was unsettling. Nevertheless, the worship team members appeared genuine, but the noise and aesthetics of the room gave the impression that the audience did not matter. However, it could be

that Church C was trying to offer a more inclusive performance style to make new people feel

more comfortable instead of a participatory style inclusion.

As the team was transitioning the stage from the worship to the message, a flat-screen TV

was wheeled out on stage to display the sermon points. The senior pastor concluded the service

with a prayer. This researcher left the parking lot as directed by the parking lot crew and police

officers.

Church D – Broken Arrow, OK

Church D is an established non-denominational church located in a cozy residential area

of East Oklahoma. It is in a rural area surrounded by a few different car lots and a golf course.

Due to the flat landscape of Oklahoma, the church is evident from the highway. Church D meets

at 9:00 am and 11:00 am on Sundays.

Though the town offered a small-town vibe, the church was anything but small. The

name of the church appeared on the front left of the building in giant white letters. The building

was long and deep, and exposed. Furthermore, there was a giant sign on the far side of the

building that told the meeting times of the worship. This signage was an incredible way to

communicate with the town, especially with its flat geography. Communicating with the

community presented a culture of inclusion and simplicity. It communicated to the town that this

church wanted everyone to know when the doors would be open.

The parking lot had two L-shaped grass areas and several light posts. A team was in place

to help direct traffic alongside police officers. The parking lot was easy to navigate due to its

signage for visitor parking.

This researcher noticed golf carts stationed throughout the main entrance areas along the

front, presumably to pick up and drop off people parking in the back lot. Again, the culture

offered through non-verbal communication was that of inclusion and service. Before entering the building, there were multiple signs giving attention to families, multiple places to park nearby, and golf carts driving to pick up those with families. The church purposefully communicated a family environment before anything else.

The front of the building offered three main entrances. The main entrance was labeled with giant letters mounted above the doors. This researcher walked into the main entrance through a group of several church greeters. These greeters wore t-shirts that said "Hello." Some of the greeters did not have on the church t-shirt, but instead word lanyards with the same "Hello" greeting. Presumably, the greeters were hand selected for this task as they were young, pretty, and several had children by their sides. The greeters reflected the demographics of the people attending the church.

The entrance to Church D was contemporary and modern. One of the first things to see is the stone fountain that served as a focal point. The left side of the lobby had bright, vibrant colors specifying the kid's zone area. This area was inviting, with pops of colors and a sign made to look like a tree with letters hanging from its fake branches. There were also swings attached to this tree, not for swinging, though it offered a fun communication culture for children and parents alike to feel excited. Furthermore, there were decals with pops of colors of church events for the kids displayed in this area.

On the right side of the fountain was a coffee and lounge area equipped with a pop-up store selling church merchandise. The store sold hats, coffee cups, t-shirts, and notebooks bearing the church logo. This area was like an airport terminal with contemporary furnishings and soft music. There were items for sale, but the coffee was accessible to all.

The visitor connection area is near the coffee café, with signage and church staff. There were information hand-outs for taking, and gifts offered to any of the guests. The gift was a scented candle, which was somewhat of a shock since the researcher had continually been gifted the same coffee mug with different branding during this research journey. This researcher noticed that music was playing in every part of the building, inside and outside, which felt like it made interactions less abrasive. Sometimes silence breeds awkwardness. Nevertheless, the visitor connection area was inviting and quickly found.

As the worship was getting ready to begin, members had to walk through the coffee area to get to a group of four double doors to enter what was called the sanctuary. The doors opened to more doors with a small foyer in between. Having two double doors made sense to help with the noise and experience. This foyer communicated a sense of differentiation between the common and worship areas.

The sanctuary was a flat floor that led to a stage roughly four feet off the ground, surrounded on three sides with dark grey chairs. The stage area had a drum set encased in glass and was lit by a catwalk lighting section above. Two screens portrayed a countdown along with announcements for upcoming events. The lights faded to visible darkness as the countdown struck zero, and the live music began.

The worship team was engaging and encouraged audience participation. Further, the worship team was racially diverse. Incidentally, the audience was equally racially diverse. This diversity was displayed and presented a culture of inclusion communicated by the different skin tones and genders on the stage—this communicated unconditional acceptance for all. The words of the songs were offered on each screen with soft, colorful backgrounds to set the mood. The

lights danced with the rhythm of the music. This researcher felt moved by the worship, and the lights helped with the emotive response.

As the worship team concluded the singing and prayers, the senior pastor entered the stage, followed by a crew member wheeling a television and another bringing out a high-top table. The touchscreen was used throughout the message for specifically displaying Bible verses. The larger screens offered different picture slides than the pastor-controlled television. The smaller television offered the Bible verses while the larger screens displayed motivational decrees from reading into the Scripture. It was beneficial to have the points, and the Bible passage displayed simultaneously.

Regarding aesthetics, the pastor wore casual clothing, and the audience seemed to follow this casual vibe. This researcher did not see anyone in a suit or sports coat. Further, the communication offered by the worship team and the senior pastor was casual and conversational, blended with encouragement and joy. This culture appeared excited about being at church and joyful about the opportunity to worship. The pastor would preach with zeal and passion, and the audience would cheer on the theology and ideology presented.

At the close of the service, the pastor prayed over the audience, and the lights brightened. The audience slowly exited through the double doors and dispersed to the parking lot. Greeters were there to hold open the doors and thank the people for attending. The parking lot crew was exceptional in getting people back on the small sideroads that lined the outside.

Church E – Jonesboro, AR

Church E is an established Baptist church centrally located toward downtown Jonesboro. The church exterior is a brick building decorated with six massive columns holding up a giant steeple. The exterior is traditional and clean. The perimeter of the building is surrounded by

beautiful grass areas, a walking track, and a disc golf course. Furthermore, areas close to the entrance presented several corn-hole boards.

The entrance of the building displayed adequate signage to show people where to enter and exit. This signage also showed the kid's area, the main entrance, and the visitor parking areas. The visitor parking spots displayed minor signs like those of handicapped parking. There were no parking lot greeters or team members outside assisting with traffic flow; however, the signage was sufficient. The main entrance had several greeters from the church, both young and old, welcoming members and guests. The greeters wore name badges.

Background music played over the speakers throughout the building as people walked around waiting for the worship to begin. When standing at the main entrance, the décor was traditional. The floors and walls were a light color. Televisions and wall lights hung on the walls. There were signs throughout the area communicating to the crowd where the main areas of the building were. There was a visitor welcome center in the central area that an attendant monitored. Furthermore, the walls offered motivational themes throughout the main entrance and hallways.

There was a coffee bar area to the right of the welcome center. This area had the Greek word Koinonia etched onto the wall in bold black. This area was mainly packed with members talking to each other. The energy was bright and filled with laughter. There were tables and chairs set up in the café.

Signs were hanging down from the ceiling, directing students to the discovery kids' and the kid's hype areas. Discovery was the area for the youngest children, and the Hype Kids were for the older children. A crew of church workers monitored these areas, and all of them were young and beautiful. This seemed intentional.

After finishing the coffee, this researcher began to walk toward the worship center, located behind the welcome center. The doors were open, and the worship center appeared dimly lit with streams of announcements playing over the giant screens on the stage. The same music continued in the worship center as it did in the main areas of the building. Also, the screens displayed a ten-minute countdown to indicate when worship was starting.

The worship center was modern and aesthetically updated. The room offered seats in a semi-circle on the main floor and stadium seating. Multiple screens on the stage danced with instrumental worship music. The words appeared on the screens for the audience to participate in worship. The worship team was youthful but lacked diversity, though the worship itself did offer a blended contemporary and traditional song service.

When the pastor came to the stage, a team member brought a high table. There was no additional television screen; the pastor used the same worship screens to display the discussed Bible verses. The pastor dressed casually and relaxed with dark, fitted jeans and an untucked button-down shirt. This casual style was certainly a trend with the membership.

At the close of the message, the pastor offered a traditional invitation and invited people down to the front while singing the final song. People joined the front of the stage to receive anyone who wanted to pray to offer a culture of inclusion and acceptance. Incidentally, a few people went to the front of the stage and met individuals with hugs and open prayers. The worship team played in the background while the lights remained dimmed. This moment was intimate and compelling. Others from the crowd joined those receiving prayer and offered physical encouragement. The worship in Church E offered cultural authenticity. People felt safe in exploiting brokenness, and church members meet this brokenness with embrace.

The worship in Church E was moving and motivating. While leaving, this researcher instinctively looked for the visitor's gift; however, there was no gift. This researcher was programmed at this point to look for a gift to be given to visitors. Nevertheless, perhaps the gift was authentic acceptance for all.

Church F – Louisville, KY

Church F is a non-denominational group of enthusiastic young and older adults in Louisville, KY. The church is built on a beautiful campus surrounded by green grass, walking paths, and freshly planted red and yellow flowers. Furthermore, this campus has multiple soccer and baseball/softball fields. The building is a modern business style. The parking lot and outside greens were massive, covering a vast area. Church F has one worship service on Thursday at 6:30 pm and two Sunday services at 9:00 am and 11:15 am.

When arriving on campus, there were signs that pointed guests to different locations. Also, there was a well-equipped parking lot team helping to direct traffic. There was visitor parking near the middle front area of the parking lot.

The front of the building displayed massive windows and cream stones. Signage was placed at different parts of the outside frame, including the welcome center, central guest entrance, sports fitness complex, and shine café. This researcher entered the main front doors greeted by several guests wearing similar-looking name tags.

The entrance led into an atrium area that looked to be the size of three football fields long. It has the appearance of an airport terminal with multiple televisions indicating information, grey neutral colors floor-to-ceiling, a café that smells of fresh bread, and even an escalator. This researcher stopped and stared for several minutes at all the lights, energy, size, and offerings within this vast atrium complex.

There were several unique elements of Church F that helped communicate this church's desire to include a diverse group. First, the decorations on the wall were contemporary and artsy, including tree/twig-like statues and mall-like furniture seating. An upstairs area offered the ability to see the building from a birds-eye view. The upstairs allowed for visibility of the connection center, classroom entrances, the auditorium entrance, and an oversized chandelier. Another exciting element of this church was the attention given to people with special needs. The café had pamphlet information about what the shine ministry was and to whom it was tailored. Incidentally, the shine café was part of the special needs ministry run by those with special needs. The workers behind the counters making drinks and collecting money were part of the special needs ministry and family. Furthermore, for sensory reasons, those with special needs had a different entrance into the worship area that led into a room that controlled sound and noise. Third, this church had two bookstores, for adults and children, in the central area. Finally, the fitness center is one of the most remarkable features of this church. The sports complex hosted a considerable room for basketball and other court sports, a spin classroom, and a weight room. This church intentionally offered a holistic opportunity for growth (e.g., spiritual, physical, and mental).

The auditorium was impressive, with theater-style seating and large screens, including a drop-down screen area like NBA scoreboards. There were thousands of seats. The carpet was neutral, and the room was lit softly as music played in the background. There were four vertical screens painted in blue waves. As people entered the room, ushers helped people find available seating.

The room darkened when the worship team started, and the lights strobed the stage. The band began to play as one guitarist spoke introductions and prayed over the service. The singer's

vocal abilities pierced the hearts of those in the room. The audience sang with the worship band as the screen produced the words to follow along. This researcher unintentionally took moments of silent pause to fully take in the worship. The worship was loud but not overdone. It was bouncy but not inappropriate. Some audience members lifted their hands in worship. The songs were contemporary.

When the speaker took the stage, the crew rolled out a television for the pastor to use as an aid for Scripture and sermon points. The words were placed on the screen, and there were times when the pastor asked the audience to read the screen aloud. This communicated purpose and inclusion for all. The pastor spoke beautifully with straightforward preparation. The sermon ended with a prayer accompanied by music, though this prayer did not end the worship. The band came back out and played another song that had been previously played and encouraged people to give online before leaving. The service was so moving and intentional that it seemed ingenious to tell the audience to give at the end. People appeared prepared at that point to give to this church due to its clear impact.

Leaving the building, this researcher felt encouraged and uplifted. From the beginning to the end, everything about this church was terrific.

Church G – Brentwood, TN

Church G is an established Baptist church located in Brentwood, TN. This church has multiple locations. This church looks like a traditional church building with red brick, an outside entrance decorated with a large cross, topped with a massive steeple. This church made this researcher feel a sense of nostalgia for its design and décor. Church G meets at 8:00 am, 9:30 am, and 11:30 am on Sunday mornings.

The campus appeared through the trees from the exit ramp off a major interstate. The building had signage on each of the buildings on campus. The main entrance was inviting, with fifteen glass doors. The outside of the building looked traditional, but the inside lobby was contemporary. The first thing people see when entering the building is a massive desk that has the words "Welcome Center" across the front. There were also pamphlets across the front with information about the church.

To the right of the welcome counter sat Community Café. This café offered a fully functioning eatery inside the church lobby with a menu similar to Starbucks. There were at least 50 tables with four chairs in a luxurious space for eating. Directly across from the café was a two-story basketball count enclosed in glass for all to see. Parents ate their breakfast while several students/kids enjoyed playing. The basketball court was fabulous and tempting as if calling students to join the church.

There were several doors within the lobby area that led to different areas. The wall's signage directed students to one hallway and K-5th grade kids to another. Interestingly there was a specific area for those with special needs. Furthermore, letters above the four groups of double doors indicated the auditorium.

The auditorium sat several hundred seats. The room and the chairs were dark, and ushers lined the aisles to help people find seats. The back section of the auditorium had stadium seating. The stage was black, with production lighting hanging overhead. This stage was furnished with instruments, a single round high-top table, and a high-top chair. A massive screen at the back of the stage exposed blue lighting with lightening yellow streaks. Everything looked great.

Once the worship band started, words were shown across the screen in bold letters indicating to the audience to sing. People sang in Church B. The worship team encouraged

members to sing and held out the microphones in hopes of more participation. At one point, one of the singers reminded the audience that worship is for all and appropriately asked the audience to sing louder to Jesus. The people on the stage were passionate, with hands held high and smiling deliberately. The worship experience felt genuine.

The pastor came onto the stage with energy and excitement. This pastor wore a traditional suit, no tie, and dress shoes. Interestingly, the audience dressed much more casually than the senior pastor. The man speaking was older with white hair and wrinkles, but the energy and orality were expressed with great enthusiasm. The words from the Bible verses and the sermon's points were displayed on the giant screen behind the speaker.

The service ended with a benediction and people begin to exit quickly. Ushers and other workers were holding open doors and offering words of thanksgiving to the crowd. The parking lot was jam-packed, which made it difficult to leave the campus efficiently, but police workers and a team of church members worked to get everyone back on the road.

Church H – Knoxville, TN

Church H is an energetic and vivacious church located in a populated residential area of Knoxville, TN. The surrounding scenery outside the building is painted with mountains and gorgeous mature trees. The parking lot was surrounded by freshly cut grass and outlined with newly planted trees that offered a country feel. This church building was sleek with a double-colored light brick building with church logo signs pressed into the mold of the structure.

When arriving, there were indicator arrows on the ground to help direct traffic flow, along with a parking team that seemed eager to greet every person. There was signage throughout the parking lot indicating particular parking locations and entrances for first-time guests. The signs made clear that visitors park in the right front area of the parking lot and walk-

through entrance door one. There are four entrances ways, and each of these entrances has signage in big, bold, black letters in all caps. Further, there were floating flags at the entrance of one door, more visually communicating to new people where to enter. The flags were deliberate and effectively got the attention of first-time visitors, including this researcher.

Church team members were standing in the lobby with name badges and lanyards, greeting guests and welcoming members. The interior was modern, with a blend of dark wood and carpet finishes. The entrance had a welcome table with brochures and information flyers that discussed church events and ministries. Everyone entering this welcome entrance was given a gift bag, stickers, and a notepad illustrated with the church's logo.

To the left of the welcome center was giant colorful signage inviting children into the kid's area. This area was decorated with large, colorful shape-like structures under a multi-colored kid's area sign. There were circular high-top tables with iPad for signing kids in and staff around this area to help with the registration process. The staff in this area were young and friendly. It appeared that this group of workers was young mothers. Perhaps this was unintentional, though it communicated safety to this researcher. Having mothers working in the children's area made it feel trustworthy and appropriate to leave kids with, in some cases, total strangers.

Banners lined the walls promoting church events and missions. The pictures were astatically pleasing and complimented the contemporary flooring and colors. One of the main focuses of the wall signage was the mission efforts. In fact, on the right side of the entrance was a coffee bar that complimented the missions being promoting by Church H. There were different coffee options, and the signage explained that the donations for a coffee went toward the mission efforts. The pictures on the back wall of the coffee station were of children; specifically, those

appeared to be part of the cause. There were also pictures on the side wall of the coffee shop indicating which countries would receive the funds.

After grabbing some coffee, this researcher went into the auditorium for worship. There were ushers outside the doors welcoming and ushers inside the room guiding people to seats. The room was dark, and the music was playing over the speakers. There were chairs to sit on. The energy in the room was electric. Much of the crowd appeared young, though it was dark. When the worship band came out, the band encouraged the audience to jump, shout, and clap. It felt like an announcer at the Tennessee Volunteer football stadium, only about fifteen miles from the church campus. The audience worshiped with screams and applause. This worship was vibrant, and the audience seemed to know how to worship in this church. When the singing started, and the words appeared on the screen, people sang out, and it seemed as if instinctively, every hand lifted.

The band moved around the stage a lot and encouraged more and more energy from other band players and the audience alike. Honestly, this researcher felt uncomfortable during what felt like forced energy. Nevertheless, the other participants seemed to love what was being presented genuinely.

There were a few video announcements, and the senior pastor took the stage. This man wore skinny jeans and an untucked button-down collar shirt with the sleeves rolled up. The pastor appeared to be fifty.

One of this auditorium's most incredible design features was the glassed-in areas for families, especially for nursing mothers and mothers with babies. This area was built into the auditorium with a glass wall of separation. However, the worship could be experienced and seen as if there was no glass barrier. Furthermore, this made the room look more aesthetically

pleasing and highlighted the youthfulness of the church because of the young mothers and babies unintentionally being put on display.

The six screens projected the words of the pastor's Bible verses, highlighted points, and further announcements embedded into this message. Throughout the sermon, there were times when the pastor encouraged more and more feedback from the audience.

This experience was enjoyable because the church communicated energy, contemporary styles, and relevance; however, it also had disingenuous moments because of the forced response. Nevertheless, the team in the lobby met the existing membership with hugs and encouragement. The parking lot was exited with efficiency.

Church I – Frisco, TX

Church I is a young and vibrant church located within the Dallas Metroplex near several thriving communities. The church reflects the Frisco culture of youthfulness, diversity, and modernization. This non-denominational church meets on Saturday at 5:00 pm and Sunday at 9:30 am and 11:15 am. The building is in the middle of Frisco, surrounded by urban industries.

The building is not completely visible from the main roadways; however, the signage for the building is. The parking lot was easy to navigate, offering signage for family parking, visitor parking, and staff parking. Further, teams of police officers and church members help with the traffic. The parking lot team looked friendly, with youthful faces offering smiles and helpful information. Visitor parking signs and cones were helping direct first-timers to a specific area. Further, attendants near the visitor parking area helped with the welcoming. The church put much effort into ensuring visitors felt comfortable and welcomed.

The entrance was sleek with a rock-face overhang and a red accent wall holding up a black cross. The building looked new and well-kept. The sidewalks looked pressure-washed, and

the building looked like it had been newly painted or washed. Giant letters on the outside of the building projected the church's name and website address.

There were two sets of doors to choose from when entering. There were door greeters in the main lobby wearing black t-shifts with the church's name and sticky name tags displaying names. The bag of the shirts read, "Here to Serve." Like the parking lot team, the door greeters were primarily youthful and energetic. The culture of this church offered youthful energy and beautiful smiles. The church seemed to want to communicate to visitors that the church was for youthful groups.

The entrance of the building opened to side lobbies that exposed a coffee bar area and walls filled with wooden and iron decorations. The inside of this building was fabulous, decorated with stained concrete floors and colorful furnishings. The lobby had a multi-colored, checkered welcome table with printed information and an iPad to sign in. There were stone and red accent walls throughout the inside hallways, like the outside.

Next to the coffee area were tables and chairs beside televisions placed vertically on the wall. The televisions had announcements, special dates, and pictures of membership participation. There were signs near this area that appeared to offer the church's culture (i.e., connect, grow, serve). The interior signage continues the urban and modern design of the building.

The kids and student area exposed blue and green painted walls, accented with bright orange and lime-green furniture. There were shapes on the wall and continued messaging of servanthood and love hanging from ceiling signs.

The auditorium was a vast room with exposed black ceilings with dimmed lighting hanging out. Further, stage lights lit up the auditorium with multi-colors. The auditorium offered

background music and announcements scrolling on the screen. The auditorium was a stadium seating design with chairs. The screen eventually offered a five-minute countdown, and the audience began slowly filling the room.

The lights were dimmed but not too dark. The worship team encouraged the audience to stand as worship began with loud music. The lights on the stage danced with the beat of the guitars. The music was loud, making it difficult to hear the congregational singing. This researcher noticed that most of the audience was singing and lifting their hands. The energy from the crowd was electric. It appeared that people wanted to worship.

One of the church's constant themes was its membership's youthfulness. Nearly everyone at church looked young, and the auditorium was packed. This researcher was excited to see many young people engaging.

The pastor was welcomed to the stage with applause after the worship music finished, dressed casually. An additional television was brought out with the pastor and used to display the biblical text and significant themes from the lesson. The sermon was uplifting, and the pastor smiled often. The audience was engaged and interacted appropriately with the pastor. The sermon ended with a dismissal prayer, and the lights lifted bright.

Thankfully, this researcher was directed to the welcome center with huge white signage indicating a visitor's gift. The gift was a tumbler bearing the church logo. Members and visitors exited the parking lot, and a team helped flow people out.

Church J – Nashville, TN

Church J is an established church in northeast Nashville. This Baptist church meets on Sunday at 8:15 am and 9:30 am. The building is located directly off I24 and is slightly visible

from the exit ramp. The building is in an older part of town, surrounded by run-down gas stations, decommissioned railroad tracks, and government housing.

The church building is surrounded by mature trees that block the view of the building from the entrance. Nevertheless, a church sign at the entrance is rusted and faded, identifying where to enter. The trees were overgrown, and the grass needed cutting.

The entrance exposed a long drive that climbed up a hill to the parking areas. Once in view, the church building was massive, decorated with many crosses and a grand front. However, the building looked old and outdated, perhaps because of the faded paint and the exposed dirt climbing the outside walls.

The front of the building was the first visual seen; however, the entrance to the building was in the back. There were multiple small signs indicating parking for handicapped members, fifty club members, and visitor parking. The parking lot was unattended.

There was a set of glass doors on the backside of the parking lot. Energetic people filled the entrance with men and women embracing everyone coming inside. The energy in the entranceway was contagious. This researcher was hugged and kissed multiple times by random strangers before making it very far into the connection desk area. The outside of the building lacked beauty intentionally, but the entrance made up for it. The members of this church were inviting and gracious to everyone. There was a noticeable diversity within the walls of this church building. This researcher distinctively stood out from the masses. However, the church felt safe and accepting.

The entrance was modernized with soft cream laminate flooring and bring stone accents. There was a connection center aligned with iPads and an attendant assisting. The connection

center was identified with signage high on the wall and stood out nicely for visitors. Further, the greeting team wore lanyards that helped identify who could help.

There were televisions on the walls that offered church announcements. Further, several areas displayed motivational words and Scriptural encouragement.

The main area led into the auditorium filled with wooden pews, dark purples, and blues. This room was a massive semi-circle room that pointed toward a formal carpeted and wooden stage with a choir section behind it. There was a massive, updated stage with screens and speakers. This church offered a stage with singers moving around to the music with passion and energy. Furthermore, four dancers were in front of the stage, but not on the stage, dancing to the music with spinning movements. While singing the second song, this dance team started dancing and waving purple and white shiny flags to the rhythm of the music.

The church was culturally diverse, with a predominantly black audience. Incidentally, the entire worship team, staff, greeters, and the bishop was black; however, a few white people were attending the worship service.

The culture of this church was vibrant and interactive. The audience shouted communication in agreement in verbal and non-verbal forms. The spiritual songs forced the choir and singers to interact back and forth. Further, the audience sang and moved with the others. This church's audience participation was passionate and engaging. This researcher was sometimes uncomfortable because of dancing; however, it appeared authentic to the culture of this church.

When the bishop came out to preach, a podium followed stamped with the church's log and name. The screens displayed Bible passages and church-giving opportunities throughout the message.

The message was biblical and practical. The audience often responded to the words from the bishop with applause and spoken affirmations. Sometimes, the audience would jump up and shout in agreement with the message. The sermon ended with an organ backing up the invitation. Church members received everyone who came to the front. Crying and shouting could be heard by those responding, even with the music playing. The bishop ended the service with a dismissal prayer, and people left for the parking lot.

Participants Themes

As previously stated, this study was carried out through the lens of a qualitative, ethnographic observation process. As a result, this researcher visited ten different churches to observe the communication trends and insights that are assisting these churches in flourishing.

Exterior and Interior Inclusion

These churches acted similarly in terms of first impressions. As people approached the church campus, there was signage on the road indicating the location of the building. Furthermore, when approaching the church's main entrance, there were signs and letters indicating where members and visitors could park. Parking team members wore parking vests or church t-shirts at all churches. The parking crews were all friendly, greeting each car with a smile and a wave. Once inside the parking lot, signs indicated special parking, specifically guest parking. The greeters smiled friendly greetings and handed out goody bags filled with coffee mugs, stickers, and candy. Each greeter wore a similar church t-shirt or a name tag, which helped communicate whom to go to for assistance if needed. When entering the foyer, there was large, bold signage indicating where each age group, guest, and the member should go. The signage was intricate and highly expressive. However, the church worker team in the foyer appeared to wait for questions rather than approaching the members and asking if assistance was required.

The waiting approach appeared to be deliberate and well-planned and communicated a sense of calm within the foyer, where information could be gathered without invading personal space.

Each of the churches on the *Outreach Magazine* Top-100 list communicated consistent energy throughout the experience. From the moment they entered the building until the last person left, they all had worship music for everyone to hear. The music appeared to convey fun and excitement within the church building, which may appear paradoxical to some. Furthermore, each church visited provided space to spread out in the foyer and seating and refreshments to consume. The church environment was designed to make families feel at ease. Each of these churches' attention to communication proved effective. Each church provided prominent décor in the welcome centers and gathering areas outside the auditorium. Church C had areas with games inside the foyer for children to play with while new families spoke with church workers and gathered information. This researcher had never seen anything like it. Several of these churches had life-sized Connect Four and Tic-Tac-Toe boards for children and adults to enjoy. Church A had couches and televisions with popcorn in various locations throughout the wraparound foyer to watch the sermon.

Children and Youth

Another distinguishing feature of these participating churches was the emphasis placed on children and youth. Each area was vibrant and loud, with high-energy font on the walls and loud dancing music. The rooms displayed decorations with strobe lights of various colors that strobed throughout the facility.

Worship

The worship teams encouraged students and adults to stand, sing, and move in response to the worship. This researcher noticed energy like a sporting event or a musical performance.

These churches were very deliberate in communicating to the children and youth that church is just as much fun as anything else, if not more fun. There is a desire to discover and express one's joy, but not everything is the same. As a result, these churches appear to have communicated to the masses that one beneficial way to worship is to be expressive through some jumping and shouting. The lighting in most of these flourishing churches was deliberately enhanced and aligned with the flow of the music. Almost all these churches had the lights dancing with the upbeat songs and offered a soft and dark light setting with slower rhythmic songs.

Aesthetics

Furthermore, church aesthetics played a role in church flourishment. Each of these churches had a grand foyer filled with volunteers and signage indicating their connection to the church. The foyers offered signs on the walls and doors directing newcomers and current members where to go. In addition, each of these churches had gathering areas in the foyer. Each church visited tried to communicate the need for community and worship. Communicating an inclusive community culture was accomplished in several ways. From the parking lot to the foyer and beyond, everything was planned. These churches ensured that everyone knew the church was a place of worship. Signs on the wall indicated worship. The décor inside and outside these facilities featured images of Jesus and the cross. Furthermore, almost all these churches had televisions in the foyers and hallways showing people worshiping and worship music playing throughout the building to communicate the importance of worship.

This phenomenological experiment was conducted by visiting a specific category of churches to collect data. As a participant observer, this researcher collected data by making direct observations and personally experiencing the church's environment.

Research Questions Findings

Three research questions guided this study, and in the following sections, these questions will be addressed.

RQ 1 – What communication themes are observed in flourishing church cultures?

Within each of these church cultures, several common themes proved evident. First and foremost, each church participant observed was deliberate about aesthetics. According to Monteiro (2018), first impressions frequently communicate how people are perceived in the future. These churches took the initiative to ensure that every person who entered the building was acknowledged and that everyone felt a sense of belonging.

Team members were intentionally sociable and conversational, allowing people to collectively experience community and comfort. The first impression greeters in each church were people who smiled and made intense eye contact. It was interesting to note that there was no commonality in the appearance of these greeters. This researcher assumed that each greeter would be physically attractive and young. That was not true. Rather than physical beauty, the communication theme pushed throughout most of these churches was community. This community gave everyone a sense of belonging and acceptance. In addition, almost all participants had a sign in the building that said, "Welcome Home." Again, this is based on the communication principle of community and all-inclusive collaboration.

Music was another theme communicated in the culture of flourishing churches. Music was playing in the lobby and connecting areas for each church participant, as well as on stage during the worship services. The music made the transaction feel warm and inviting. The music of the speakers in the gathering areas energized and excited this researcher for worship. When there is silence in a room, people tend to be less engaged in conversation. As a result, music was

provided by these churches throughout the experience, which seemed to alleviate social awkwardness.

Another communication theme observed in the flourishing churches studied was the emphasis placed on inclusion. Each church set aside time during the worship service to welcome people nearby. These churches had welcome centers and promotional areas where everyone could get information about the church's atmosphere. There were visible stations throughout the foyers, central area, and auditorium that provided signage to assist members in becoming more included and new people learn how to be involved. This effort was not surprising because studies show that people need to be needed and included (Anderson, 2021; Mbacham-Enow, 2019; Van Engen, 2014).

Spiritual development was a third central communication theme seen in these flourishing churches. These churches had signage promoting Bible apps, plans, and memorization opportunities. Each church communicated to the audience the value and importance of the Bible. This researcher was concerned about visiting some of these large congregations, believing that church marketing plans must be centered on entertainment and activity; however, the importance of the Bible was communicated to these participants. Each church had signs on the wall of motivational Bible verses. The classrooms had Bible characters and themes hanging up for viewers. Each of these participating churches had the words of the songs on the screens (often multiple screens) and the words of the Bible verses being discussed.

Further, spiritual development was seen in these flourishing churches as each explored secular living and relevant events in the sermons but always used the Bible to explain how to manage daily living. Pastors talked about life events from the perspective of the Bible and expressed the importance of spiritual wellness but always had the Bible verses on the screens for

viewing. Showing the Bible on the screen communicated to the audience that learning about life was meaningful but learning about the Bible was most important. The opportunity for individuals to learn how to develop spiritually in a church setting was perhaps the most prominent communication theme observed in these participating churches.

Notice that the focus of this study was on flourishing churches. It should be noted that determining what constitutes a flourishing church is a challenging task. This study looked at two types of churches to get a complete picture of church flourishing. These two categories examined the fastest-growing and largest churches on the *Outreach Magazine* Top-100 list. According to this definition of church flourishment, the churches observed were equally intentional about providing opportunities for people to learn how to serve. During the worship service, a person, usually the lead pastor, communicates to the congregation about various personal development and service opportunities. When hearing leaders extend invitations to anyone who wanted to serve, this researcher felt excited and valued as an observer. Furthermore, these churches appeared to provide serving and self-learning opportunities for people of all abilities.

RQ 2 – How is a church's culture communicated?

In examining the participants within this study, each of these churches seemed purposeful in communicating the church's culture. However, communicating a culture takes intentionality, innovation, and consistency. The intentional communication of culture was a common theme amongst all ten church participants. Many of these churches had signage on the wall that indicated the church's culture, specifically, "Welcome Home." Nearly, all the churches expressed the culture through video announcements and spoken communication from the stage. The videos displayed in the foyer areas and in the auditoriums offered upbeat music, with excited faces telling the attendees of future events. While this study did not examine church websites or social

media content produced and pushed by the participant churches, this researcher did observe each of these churches communicate to the congregation that there were multiple places online to view the culture of the church.

The culture of these church participants is expressed through non-verbal communication. Each of these churches was appropriately maintained, except for Church J. It was evident that church leadership made sure to have lawns cut, and bushes trimmed. This researcher could smell the fresh-cut grass on more than one occasion during the church visits. Further, the parking lots were clean, and the signage in the parking lot was readable. When walking into the church building, the lights were bright, the entrances were clean, and they mostly smelled like freshly brewed coffee. This researcher remembers thinking that the church smelled like home due to the coffee penetrating people's nostrils. This multi-sensory communication seemed to be an intentional way to communicate a culture of hospitality and excellence. These flourishing churches wanted the members and guests alike to understand the presented home culture.

Furthermore, when walking into the church buildings, there was a culture of inclusion and community, with team members in place to greet everyone at the parking lot and building entrances. This researcher felt welcomed repeatedly and wondered if others felt this same joy when being greeted at every entrance.

Each of these participants had poured money into expensive lighting and audio productions. The presentation of the stages was technologically advanced and prepared for a dynamic worship construction. Expensive stages communicated the importance of church building aesthetics.

Throughout these experiences, the ten participant churches observed in this study communicated culture through a blend of verbal and non-verbal communication techniques. This

study looked at two types of churches to get a complete picture of church flourishment. The fastest-growing and largest churches on the *Outreach Magazine* Top-100 list were examined in these two categories. These churches produced a culture that communicated its intentionality about providing opportunities for all people.

RQ 3 – How does an outsider receive the culture communicated by a flourishing church?

This study was conducted across multiple states in different areas of the country as an outsider participant observer. The culture was communicated to outsiders through a variety of hospitable offerings. Visitor parking banners, parking team assistance, greeters, clear signage, welcome/connection centers, gift bags, and benedictions all contributed to the culture of hospitality and inclusion. Worship teams encouraged audience members to participate in the worship experience.

Each speaker on the stage used large screens to display lyrics to songs and Bible verses, allowing an outsider worship inclusion, along with a smaller teaching screen on the stage for message notes. This deliberate use of expressive signage and worship inclusion communicated to outsiders a culture that valued community and God, which appears to be consistent with biblical precision and correctness.

<div align="center">Summary</div>

This phenomenological qualitative ethnography of ten flourishing churches used a participant-observer approach to collect data by making direct observations and personally experiencing each church's culture and communication environment. This chapter presented essential data collected from each of the ten observed churches, and this data was used to answer each of the study's research questions.

The next chapter will discuss each of the study's research questions in depth. Additionally, the study's theoretical framework, the elaboration likelihood model (ELM), will be discussed.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

This study examined communication in flourishing church cultures to identify useful themes for religious organizations. A qualitative ethnography approach was used in this study. In the previous chapter, this research examined the themes found within flourishing church cultures. This chapter will summarize the findings using the study's research questions as an organizing framework. Next, the study's results, implications, and limits will be discussed.

Overview

Three primary research questions guided this research, and in this section, each of these research questions will be answered and discussed.

RQ 1 – What communication themes are observed in flourishing church cultures?

RQ 2 – How is the church's culture communicated?

RQ 3 – How does an outsider receive the culture communicated by a flourishing church?

Summary of Findings

RQ 1 – Communication Themes

Several common themes emerged within each of these church cultures. Within these observed flourishing churches, there were five primary communication themes: inclusion, music, spiritual development, aesthetics, and the attention given to the benediction. The communication of the churches visited demonstrates each of these five categories.

Inclusion

"Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching" (*New International Version*, 1973, Hebrews 10:25). Koinonia, which means "fellowship" or "community" in Greek, is a concept that is often associated with Christian communities. Koinonia was a common theme

found throughout the examined churches. Specifically, the sense of total inclusion experienced

by people of Church J embodied the concept of Koinonia and the power it wields.

The entrances to these churches were crowded with warm and friendly people who

greeted this researcher warmly. Churches A, B, C, D, F, G, H, I, and J went above and beyond to

make the church feel like a family and community. Aside from the coffee shop's unexpected and

likely unintentional outcasting. Even Church E did an excellent job of communicating a culture

of inclusion. Nonetheless, each church displayed signage directing visitors to the appropriate

locations because the church wanted people to feel included.

Church B, D, F, and I all displayed areas for families and kids to be welcomed more

intentionally than others with giant slides and vibrant colored letters directing people to the kid's

areas. Church B especially put a two-story slide on display as its focal point of the visitor's

entrance. Families with children flocked to that area. The slide offers kid-friendly visuals that

communicate that children are just as essential to the church as adults. The colors and activities

displayed from the first look were aesthetically pleasing and offered a family inclusion rather

than just an adult inclusion. Churches are meant to display a group of people that make up a

family, and Church B displayed this family narrative well.

Cromartie (2021) explained that people are looking for a place of community within a

religious organization that offers goodness and friendship. Cialdini and Goldstein (2002)

suggested that liking an individual was "twice as important as was their opinion of products" (p.

40). According to Carroggio (2021), communication identity aids in the development of culture

and community. "Culture is a 'here and now dynamic phenomenon as well as a coercive

background structure that influences us in a variety of ways" (Schein, 2010, p. 3). According to

Hepburn (2017), "communication contributes to the development of a shared understanding or

organizational identity" (p. 27). "Communication functions as a fulcrum…that supports a dynamic process that leads to the co-creation of meaning by individuals" (Roman-Gloro, 2017, p. 9). Thus, communication is crucial in the building of a communication culture. When intentionality is used to build palatable communication, communities and organizations fare well (Croucher et al., 2015).

Previous research supports this researcher's findings that community and inclusion are critical themes that serve as the foundations of many flourishing churches. People desire community. Interestingly, the signage in Church A-J provided glimpses of inclusive communication (i.e., welcome center, connection station, kid zone), making people feel less like guests and more like family members. Inclusion was carried on by the church's staff and volunteers, who wore name badges, t-shirts, and lanyards to greet anyone who entered the building. It seems that all ten observed churches intentionally created a multi-sensory environment to make everyone feel included.

Music

The second communication theme observed in all ten observed churches was music. Music was playing in the lobby and connection areas for each church participant and being performed on stage during the worship services. Church D had music playing throughout the building and in the parking lot. Church E played music throughout the building and was heard at the front entrance. The music provided a welcoming, inviting transaction. The music of the gathering areas' speakers energized and excited this researcher for worship. Specifically, the music played over the speakers helped prepare this researcher for future worship. People tend to be less engaged in conversation when there is silence. As a result, these churches provided music throughout the experience, which seemed to alleviate social awkwardness. Music was playing

both in the parking lot and inside Church D. Music from the beginning of the experience made the experience feel less abrasive.

Music not only helps to avoid awkward silences but also pricks an audience's emotions (Johnson et al., 2010). Church A - J all made a significant investment of time, talent, rehearsal, and equipment in providing music to the congregation—the music aided in immersing the audience in the experience. The volume of the worship music in the services of Church A, C, and I provide an interesting sub-theme. From the perspective of this researcher, the volume of the music was so loud that it sometimes interfered with this researcher's experience. The volume of the audio speakers booming into the audience seemed to be less of an aid to worship and more of a hindrance. However, the volume of the music in these churches seemed to be typical and the flourishing nature of the church requires the volume not be a point of judgement or failure, rather an interesting sub-theme and possible opportunity for further research.

Music playing in the lobbies, as people entered, set an emotional tone for the audience. It was frequently bouncy and upbeat. This music complemented the church's mood and the energy of the colors and lights. Churches D, E, F, G, H, I, and J did an excellent job of providing music with a high-energy beat. It was both elegant and bouncy. In the background of the welcome, Churches A, B, and C played more contemporary praise music.

Furthermore, each church participant provided videos containing announcements and upcoming church events, with more upbeat background music to complement the verbiage. The videos with upbeat music conveyed excitement for upcoming events. This video communication was an excellent way to maintain the church's tone.

Spiritual Development

The third communication theme observed among these ten church participants was the attention paid to spiritual development. Spiritual development is a personal journey that involves exploring one's inner self and seeking a deeper understanding of the world around us. It often involves a search for meaning and purpose and a desire to connect with something greater than oneself. Objective morality refers to the idea that certain actions are inherently right or wrong, regardless of cultural or personal beliefs (Koenig, 2012; Richardson, 2021).

Many spiritual traditions view objective morality as an essential component of spiritual development. By aligning one's actions with moral principles, individuals can cultivate a sense of integrity, compassion, and inner peace. At the same time, spiritual development can help individuals to understand and appreciate the complexity of moral issues and to approach ethical dilemmas with greater clarity and compassion (Bruce, 2017; Vanderweele & Case, 2021). The observed churches in this study seemed to intentionally give spiritual development overt attention and focus. For example, many churches communicated this attention with signs on the walls offering spiritual encouragement. Church A had a sign that said "Jesus Died for All." Church I had a sign that stated, "God Chose You." The signs motivated people to seek God, believe in the plan, and build community. Church A had indicator signs hanging from the ceilings to offer building directions and much larger signs offering spiritual direction. Church I had a sign that said, "Everything is Possible with God." Church C had a sign that said, "Broken and Ready," with a picture of Jesus displayed as a carpenter in the background. Church D had signs with images of families embracing each other from different ethnic backgrounds communicating a unity in Christ. Church E had signs of different shapes and colors, especially in the kid zone areas, communicating the fun nature of the church and negating the false

misconceptions of being stuffy or boring. The kids in Church E flocked to the area that hung signs with different shapes and offered loud and vibrant colors. This communication technique worked. Church I had signs hanging throughout the building that indicated how people might serve, connect, and grow. Church J had a collage of encouraging words painted on the wall behind the welcome center. These signs above connected stations that helped people take the next step in their spiritual development.

Flourishing churches seem intentional about providing fun spiritual development for all ages. It appeared that children saw signs that looked like lightning bolts (Church C) or giant slides in a kid zone (Church B) or a giant tree with fun branches (Church D), or areas decorated like a front porch (Church C), helping with church flourishment. One reason these church participants flourish could be the intentional communication attention given to spiritual development. Spiritual development is about offering the opportunity to know God and the Bible and getting people excited about it.

Finally, spiritual development can profoundly impact a community by promoting positive values and behaviors. As individuals engage in spiritual practices, they may become more mindful and compassionate in being salt and light. This can lead to a greater sense of empathy and understanding for others, which in turn can foster more harmonious relationships and reduce conflict.

Moreover, spiritual communities often prioritize service to others, such as volunteering or providing charitable assistance. This can help to address social issues and improve the quality of life for marginalized groups. Ultimately, spiritual development can inspire individuals to become active agents of positive change, contributing to a more peaceful, just, and compassionate society.

Aesthetics

The fourth communication theme observed among these ten church participants was tailored aesthetics. When this researcher discusses aesthetics, it is meant to cover the clothing of the members and pastors, the design and colors of the building, and the stage atmosphere. Each church participant intentionally offered an aesthetic that communicated and complemented the church's culture. Previous research explained that religious organizations that are intentional about communicating stage aesthetics with the worship service flourish (Hart, 2015; Koenig, 2012; Matrachi & Habibabad, 2022), and churches that are intentional about clothing aesthetics could also flourish (Schmidt, 1989; Snow et al., 2010). Bauck (2021) stated,

> The pastors are trying to create an environment inviting the people who previously wrote church off to create a space that says: "People are making following Jesus cool! Look at Justin Bieber and Kanye – they are professing Christians. We will dress the same way to build off this momentum." (para. 5)

Bauck's (2021) emphasis on fashion and style in churches was also evident in this study's ethnographical observations. The pastor in Church A wore skinny jeans and a fitted t-shirt. Church B pastor wore similar dark jeans with a button-down shirt. The pastor of Church D dressed casual as well with jeans and t-shirt.

Furthermore, the crowd's clothing and pastors' helped express the church's culture. This researcher assumed that the pastors of these church participants would wear the latest trends and avoid traditional attire (i.e., formal wear). The pastors of Church A, B, C, D, E, H, and I wore what this researcher assumed would be worn in these churches. The pastors were dark, skinny, designer jeans with fitted dress shirts. The speaker was dressed casually, as was the

congregational membership. However, participants F, G, and J, and the pastors, dressed in more formal attire in church.

Churches A-I was noticeably taking care of the grass, trimming the shrubs, and keeping the building clean. The signs outside were visible and polished for easy reading. Furthermore, Church B, H, and J offered bright blue and white flags to help indicate parking and visitor entrances. These indicators were all purposeful attention to the cultural aesthetic of the church.

As previously noted, music supported the aesthetic vibe. Walking into the building, each church played music for the people to hear and help set an intentional mood and aesthetic.

In most of the churches, lighting also played an important role in creating and maintain an intentional aesthetic. When walking into the worship areas, the observed churches kept the lights on low and almost entirely off when the worship countdown ended. Church G and H had dark rooms, dark floors, and dark seating. It was a separation from the lobby into something more. This researcher felt the energy shift from the main connection areas and the auditoriums. The connection areas and entrance were staged aesthetically for people to embrace with others in the community. At the same time, the darkness and mystery of the auditoriums (Church A, B, C, F, G, H, I, J), sanctuary (Church D), and worship center (Church E) were set to embrace the unseen but all-knowing God. This researcher felt that shift all because of the aesthetics of the rooms being entered.

While there was not a stylistic uniformity among all 10 churches, 7 of 10 churches leaned toward casual clothing. This may be a trend worthy of future research.

Closing

The fifth communication theme observed among these ten churches was the attention given to the close of the worship. Church E and J closed the worship by offering people an

opportunity to come to the front of the auditorium for prayer. Churches A, B, C, D, G, and I closed the service with a prayer from the pastor. Church F and H ended the service with the worship team returning to play another dismissal song. This researcher felt safe and at ease with a prayer send-off instead of a call to the front.

RQ 2 – Communicating Church Culture

Communication identity, according to Carroggio (2021), aids in the development of culture and community. Hepburn (2017) described how communication contributes to an organism's cohesiveness. Thus, observing churches that strategically and intentionally use communication to build and sustain a desired organization culture could offer many useful insights. In all ten of this study's observed churches, the unique culture and personality of the church was evident throughout the site visit.

Attendees at each church ranged in age, with multiple age demographics represented; however, some churches seemed to intentionally present a more youthful culture than others. For example, Churches A, B, H, and I all created a first impression of a young and vibrant church by posting greeters who were young and energetic at visitor entrances. Furthermore, these churches, displayed the youthfulness more prominently than others. For example, Church A, B, H, and I had young worship teams on the stage, and young people in the video announcements. Churches C, F, G, and J, on the other hand, appeared to be much more welcoming to all generations. Church C had different age groups out in the front areas greeting. Church F and G had a balance of youth and older members leading in the worship team on the stage. Similarly, Church J seemed intentional about diversity of race and age by having different aged groups helping in leading.

This researcher was surprised that age demographics seemed to have a minor impact on whether a church flourished. Previous research suggested an intergenerational struggle among churches today that prevents them from thriving (Eisner, 2005; Jolliffe & Foster, 2021; Kumar, 2014), but this study would demonstrate otherwise. Therefore, it is possible that the magic element in all of these churches is that there seems to be no struggle. It seems that all ten churches were comfortable with all demographics of their church. Some churches focused on connecting with younger families, while others connected with multiple age groups. Thus, perhaps the secret is that the church has a clear focus and intentionality and is not mired down in flights and struggles. This observation could lead to more research. According to Ellor and McFadden (2011), "each generation has wanted to grow in their faith collectively, even if that means in different ways" (p. 50). The culture of these churchgoers seemed to be centered on reaching all people in their community, not specific generational groups.

Almost all churches used video announcements and spoken communication from the stage to express their culture. The videos were filled with upbeat music and smiling faces, expressing a friendly and exciting culture. This researcher had memories of singing old hymns like "Happy and I" and noticing the worship leader frown while leading. The video announcements, worship team on stage, greeters, parking lot crew, and pastors/bishops all contributed to a positive atmosphere.

Aside from church J, each building and grounds had fresh paint, clean smells, and recently cut grass. The atmosphere was filled with joy and love for the church and its grounds. This level of cleanliness and upkeep communicates a culture of value and love.

RQ 3 – Culture Communication to Outsiders

This researcher collected data by interacting with churches as a visitor which provided useful insights to this question. Since this researcher acted in the role of visitor, this researcher was able to experience the church's culture through the lens of an outsider.

Outsiders received the culture being communicated through the assortment of hospitable offerings. The culture of hospitality and inclusion was displayed through visitor parking banners, parking team assistance, greeters, clear signage, welcome/connection centers, gift bags, and benedictions. Worship teams encouraged the audience members to join in the experience of worship. Many of the churches specifically encouraged visitors to identify themselves in the service. This helped in making the visitors feel welcome. Further, the interpersonal human embrace was evident through warm smiles, words of encouragement, and embrace. Church J offered hugs and kisses to this researcher as the initial greeting. Interestingly, each person that came into Church J was greeted similarly. Church C offered a front porch seating location for a community with others. Church G offered a grand café with enough seats for many people to engage and receive the surrounding culture. When entering Church A, B, C, E, and H this researcher could smell coffee in the foyers. Although each of the ten observed churches in this study presented a unique culture, all of the churches ensured that the weekend service was more than just a sermon or a music service. Rather, each church provided members and guests with an experience that communicated the church's values and culture.

Outlier Discussion – Church J

This section explores and describes Church J individually because, while this church categorically fit into the purposeful sample of churches, the observed experience was

significantly different from many of the other churches. This section will highlight some of these unique approaches observed in Church J.

Church J offered several anomalies that should be communicated, specifically regarding aesthetics. The building looked dirty, with brown dirt climbing the outside walls, the front road sign missing letters, and the grass and trees overgrown. The church had no grand entrance designed to draw in visitors or build community. There was no beautiful or exciting focal point. However, after walking in the door, everything about the outside environment and look was soon forgotten. Church J opened the doors to warm love and embrace. The décor on the inside did offer some motivational signage, but even so, it appeared outdated and ran down. The people in the foyer, however, made the experience unforgettable. This researcher felt included, safe, and excited, not because of the cleanliness and attention to updated technologies and decorations, but because the people went above and beyond to communicate acceptance and love. It seems that thousands of people flocked to this outdated, neglected building because of the magnetic draw of rich, deep, welcoming Christian community. That is the point. This researcher loved the décor, the colors, the technological advances, and the fancy cafés on display in church A-I. However, church J was exciting because it pushed a culture of human embrace and acceptance over everything else. This church demonstrates that aesthetics may not necessarily be crucial to church flourishment.

Furthermore, the audience dressed in more formal wear, and the bishop wore a three-piece, pin-striped suit paired with shoes that looked like they had been recently polished. The audience mostly wore formal clothing as well. This researcher was noticeably underdressed.

Regarding the music, church J had a full choir accompanied by singers and a band on the stage. The choir backed up the singers with dancing and shouting. This was very different from

the other participants. Church C was noticeably loud during the service and was somewhat distracting, but Church J was much louder but felt more motivational and spiritual. This researcher was confused about how something that seemed so unrehearsed could appear so beautiful and purposeful. Dancers also accompanied the music in Church J on the floor in front of the seats. This culture during this worship was exuberant and reverent. People appeared to be genuinely worshiping.

Like church E, church J offered an altar call to the front after the service. This call was much more persuasive and aggressive. The bishop spoke the loudest during the benediction moments. There was screaming and shouting to come to Jesus, and the audience loved the conclusion. People around the room were lifting hands, bouncing up and down, and flocking to the front for prayer. This felt untraditional but effective.

One important theme communicated with Church J was inclusion for all. Inclusion can be found in various ways, including through shared interests, cultural connections, or experiences. It is important to create spaces that welcome and embrace diversity and actively seek opportunities to connect with a difference.

The culture being communicated within Church J was acceptance. Overall, Church J was different but proven to be flourishing. There were apparent differences surrounding the communication culture of Church J. However, these differences did not negate inclusion to all. This researcher felt comfortable amongst the people due to their warm invitation of expressed love and connection. This church communicated that people could find inclusion even when differences are evident.

Discussion

During this qualitative ethnographic study, the ten observed churches communicated cultures that included inclusion, music, spiritual development, aesthetics, and benediction attention. This study was framed by the elaboration likelihood model. The elaboration likelihood model is a theory of influence that explores human action's central and peripheral routes (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

Theme and ELM Connections

Regarding ELM, the central route communication was overtly and directly communicated through spoken words, handouts, name badges and directional signage. The peripheral route communication offered indirect communication. The peripheral route communication was seen in the grounds and buildings. One of the challenges of this study was the limited contact. By this, this researcher means that no person said that first impressions were valuable, but the value was implied through peripheral action. For example, the flowers and grass smells offered sensory communication rather than data-driven and rational. Churches provided music for the ears and the smells of coffee inside the foyers. Each church gave attention to color schemes and playful kid zone areas to communicate its culture. This was all done through indirect communication.

There were quick glimpses of themes that caught this researcher off guard. For example, the music was heard throughout the building and during the worship (i.e., peripheral route), but the emotive components gleaned from the music were unanticipated and overwhelming. Specifically, this researcher felt the movement and energy of church J when the choir was singing, the bishop was shouting, and the dancers were dancing. This researcher felt

uncomfortable at first glance but then, through investigative observation, felt genuine and fantastic.

This researcher assumed that much of the money collected was given to fancy equipment and designer clothing. However, through the lens of the central communication route, the reality was that much of the money collected went to missions and benevolence. Many church pastors spent time communicating where funds were going and how the church giving was impacting the community and world. For example, Churches B and H centrally communicated that the money used to buy coffee at the café went directly to mission efforts. The fact that the church communicates the impact of the giving tells this researcher that the leadership understood the preconceived bias that many might have of larger churches.

The struggle to understand precisely why some churches flourish more than others is difficult. The researcher wondered why these churches had an advantage over other churches doing similar things during this research. Perhaps doing just one or two things from the five flourishing themes is insufficient, but an entire compilation is required to flourish. Maybe churches are doing similar things, but the impact is not the same. Maybe some churches have a kid's ministry, but the ministry is not featured as a significant and valuable tool to reach outsiders? Maybe some churches have worship service, that the musical quality is low, or the sound is bad, and the people are hindered and disengaged? Perhaps there are churches with Biblical preachers, but the presentation is boring and does not connect with everyday challenges of the audience. Maybe visitors are valued but made to feel like a potential sale or embarrassed by being asked to stand up and be recognized. Maybe a toxic struggle exists between generations rather than a unified multigenerational team focused on creating a welcoming and safe

environment? Maybe none of the themes discovered in this study are objective but subjective to each participant.

There must also be some communication about the spirituality of the process. Does God only allow some churches to flourish? This researcher did not know the time spent in prayer or Bible study for church growth. Perhaps the Holy Spirit is the common denominator driving flourishing in these churches studied in this study. Perhaps if a stranger or outsider feels welcomed, maybe the Holy Spirit does too. These are unanswered questions, but they do not negate the validity of the research findings but offer an element of clarity due to the elusiveness of the observations.

Implications

This section discusses the practical and methodological implications of the findings. The findings are organized around the observations made during the qualitative ethnographic research.

Methodological

The qualitative phenomenological tradition methodology provided insights into what churches can do to flourish. Because of the exploratory nature of the in-person context, this research method and tradition are appropriate for the information gathered. The researcher visited ten churches on the Top-100 *Outreach Magazine* list and lived in the experience of the culture offered through communication. Unfortunately, this researcher was unable to learn about the motivations that drive the culture of these churches; however, this method was designed to identify precisely what any visitor would experience when visiting a church. Consider the value of this research. How many pastors get an email from a visitor explaining what they experienced and how that experience kept the visitor from returning? The pastor only gets emails and

feedback from members. This research offers a perspective that most pastors never get to see. As a result, the value provided by this researcher is the explanation provided by a first-hand witness during this experience. This researcher was able to simulate the experience of a new visitor on campus, which is extremely valuable from a phenomenological standpoint.

Practical

The results of this study suggest that churches implementing intentionality toward inclusion, spiritual development, music, aesthetics, and benediction can often build a sustainable and flourishing church with longevity. Additionally, this data showed that intentionality is observable and recognizable. The implication is that people tend to want to join something that offers a purposeful connection, and every church observed in this study provided opportunities to experience this purposeful connection. While culture changes over time, the need to experience meaningful connections will likely remain. Therefore, while churches may need to adjust and modify how meaningful connections are achieved, the mission of fostering those connections remains timeless.

Furthermore, why would a church avoid these practices of building church flourishment? As discussed in previous chapters, Jesus' call to the church is to make disciples and be fishers of men. These churches provide practical and actionable communication practices that could help any church more effectively fulfill the call of Christ. This researcher had the opportunity to walk into church buildings unannounced and obverse the communicated culture. This provided a raw and relevant lived experience for examining the norms of a church. Furthermore, this eliminated any attempt at false impersonations of the church culture.

When developing a plan to build a flourishing church, it might benefit church leaders to emulate the method presented in this study. This is important because it negates the special

treatment that one researcher may receive if the church believes an article will comment on the organization. However, also it allows for the researcher to receive the red-carpet treatment. This researcher parked in visitor parking each time and walked into the designated areas to be seen as a visitor living the experience of the church culture. This experience was unbelievably telling. Church members and staff were displayed in a natural setting to explain the communicative culture of the church without the pressure of knowing they were being observed.

Additionally, this researcher identified a few practical implications for church leaders. As indicated, the clothes that a pastor wears are not always indicative of a church's flourishing. However, speakers of churches A, B, C, D, E, H, and I wore dark, skinny, designer jeans with fitted dress shirts. The point is that as a speaker, the pastor is put on display. Thus, the look, energy, facial expressions, attention to video detail, and the people in positions of viewed leadership all indicate the church's culture. Church leaders need to understand that, fair or not, the church's culture is always being communicated. If a church leader wants an energetic and exciting church, the leader will fill the outside and inside with vibrant signage and people who communicate that energy or excitement. Church leaders who strive for the worship to be emotive-based ought to consider giving attention to the lights and the music and connecting that to the benediction. If a church leader wants a youthful crowd, perhaps be mindful of the location of the building and the proximity of where young people are stationed on the church campus. Regarding worship and singing, church leaders ought to have a worship leader who can motivate the crowd to lift hands or voices if that is the culture the church wants to communicate.

Within each of these church cultures, several common themes emerged. Five primary communication themes were observed within these flourishing churches: inclusion, music, spiritual development, aesthetics, and benediction attention. The communication of the churches

visited exemplifies each of these five categories. Throughout this experience, this researcher was constantly reminded of the simple, pragmatic techniques that any church or church leader can implement for greater church flourishment. Regardless of the size of the church or the location, each itemized theme can help a church flourish. Overall, the pragmatic findings of this study indicate that churches place a high value on inclusion and community and serve that intentionality through the themes of the culture.

Delimitations and Limitations

As with any study, some delimitations and limitations related to the current research should be discussed. This study cannot consider all the factors contributing to a flourishing church. However, it was able to locate some reasonable communication-centric practices that could be beneficial to some churches. Also, delimitations of the current research should be discussed. This study used a qualitative ethnographic research method based on a phenomenological traditional approach. This decision was made because the study sought to understand flourishing churches through lived experience.

This study was primarily limited by the boundary of the study, especially time and size, and only visiting the church once. This researcher only viewed the church on the Sunday morning in-person service. Further, due to the size, this study could not observe all the cultures being communicated. Finally, this study was limited to only one visit. Since culture is an ever-evolving concept, the way a flourishing church engages culture will likely evolve as well. Therefore, this study is understood to be a snapshot of the study's ten observed churches. A commitment to ongoing future research is needed to keep the scholarship fresh and relevant to the shifting culture.

Future Research

This study aimed to better understand the cultural perceptions communicated within flourishing churches. This study observed ten churches from multiple states. Further research may consider expanding the sample to include churches not associated with the Top-100 *Outreach Magazine* list. Future research may consider shrinking the span of the study only to include one specific religious group.

Furthermore, since this study only conducted one observational visit for each church participant, future research may consider a multi-visit, longitudinal study.

Finally, future research may consider a single church study on Church J or other churches affiliated with church J. Church J is an outlier regarding aesthetic data; however, this church is flourishing. Future research may be able to study church J and offer a more in-depth understanding of the church's culture.

Summary

This study offers qualitative phenomenological observations that analyze and describe the communication styles used in ten flourishing churches. Since most churches' leaders likely desire their churches to flourish, this research contributes to the practical body of knowledge available to pastors and church leaders. Further, by illuminating the communicative processes used by flourishing churches through the theoretical framework of ELM, this research also contributes to the body of communication scholarship. Thus, this study provides an in-depth ethnographical examination of the researcher's lived experiences visiting flourishing churches to assist in the growth of the Kingdom of God and the local church.

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APPENDIX

Systematic List Used for Researcher Observation

- What was communication with the outside aesthetics?

- Were there people outside communicating help for new guests?

- What signage was used to communicate to guests on the outside/inside?

- Was the parking lot cleaned (trees trimmed, grass cut, painted, sign worked, etc.)?

- Were there places for guests to park or transportation within the parking lot?

- Did anyone speak to me when I was in the parking lot? Front door? How many?

- Was there an information desk communicating the culture of the church?

- Were there interior signs and banners helping with offering direction?

- What type of clothing was worn and communicated?

- What was the age and gender of the door/parking lot greeters? Intergenerational?

- Was there an area for kids and how was that communicated (signs, colors, name tags, etc.)?

- Did worship teams have the words on the screen for singing/praise?

- Were Scriptures placed on the screen during the message to follow along or did the pastor communicate for the members to use their Bible app to follow?

- Were there goody bags for guests and how was that communicated?

- What was in the bag and what did that communicate?

- Was there a team to specifically seek out new guests? What did they look like?

- Did the church have pre-worship music? Post-worship?

- How was information gathered from guests for a follow-up?